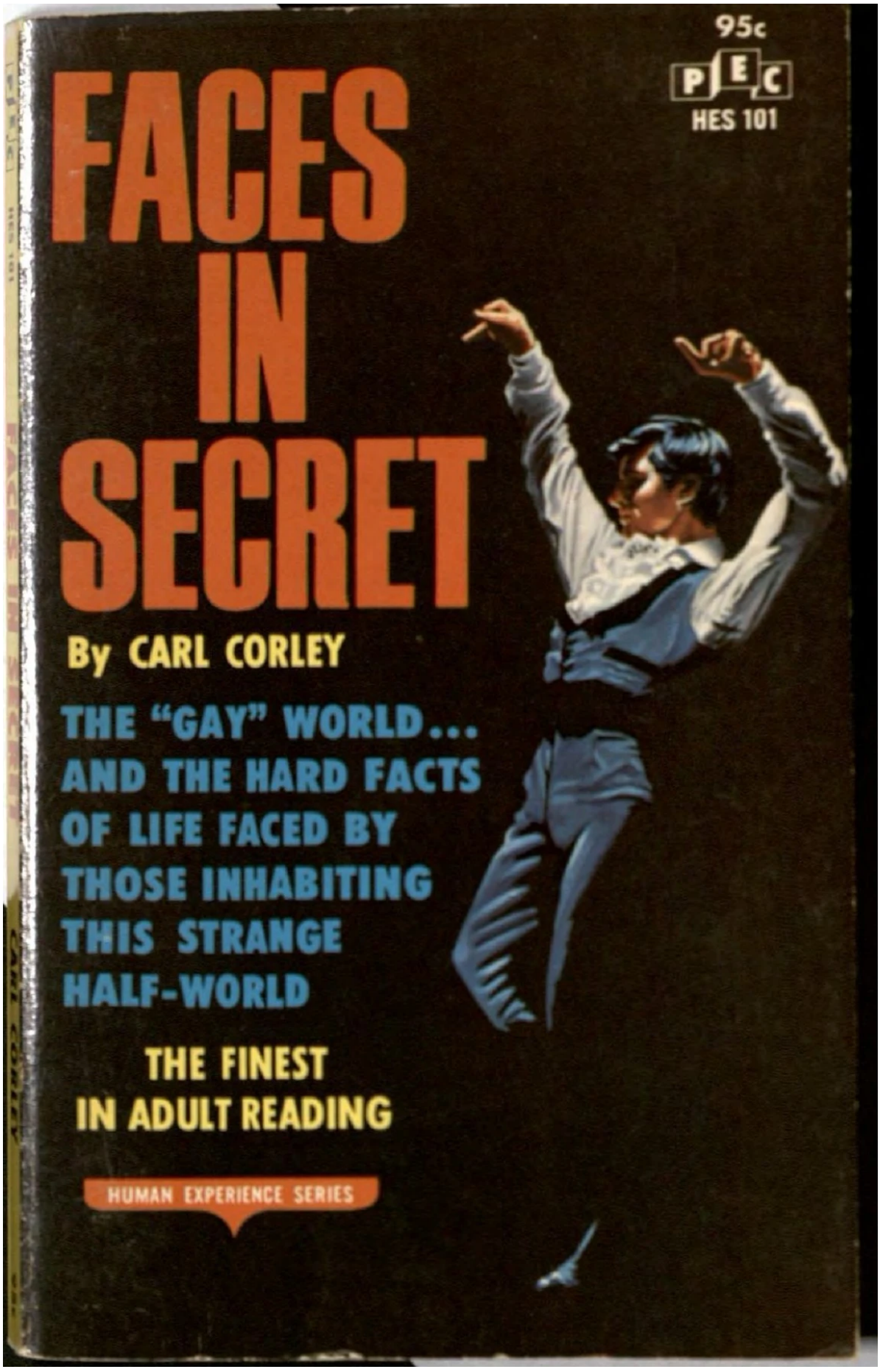
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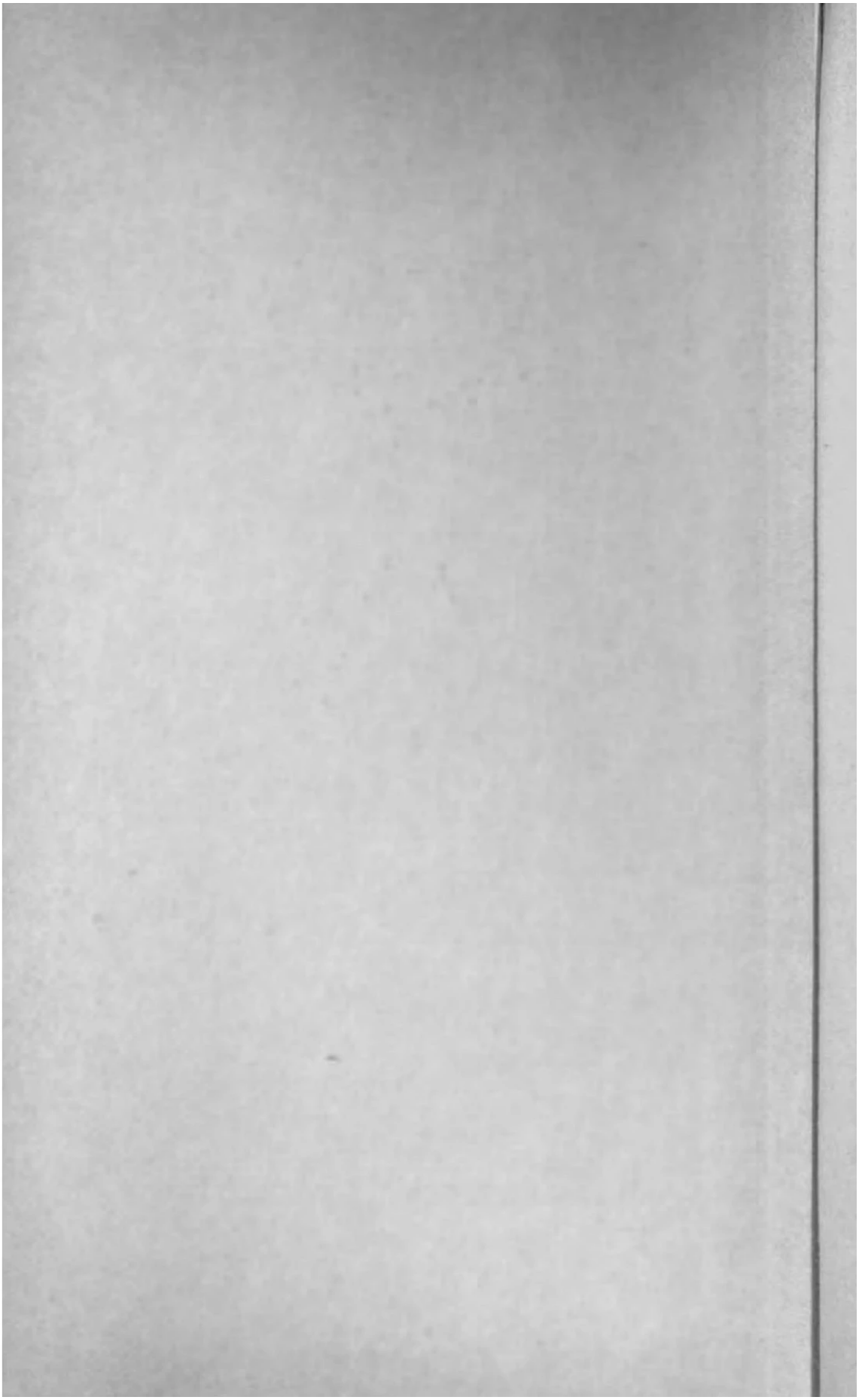

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FACES IN SECRET

by

CARL V. CORLEY

All characters and situations
in this book are fictitious.

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CARL V. CORLEY:

My Purple Winter

The Scarlet Lantern

Hide them in the dust together; and bind their faces in secret.

. . . From the Book of Job

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CHAPTER ONE

My great Aunt, the last of the old Southern Aristocrats in our family, always said: "An evil bird always builds an evil nest."

She would have said the same thing about the Blue Mirror Lounge, had she ever entered the place, and she'd have given me a dire scolding had she known I was even near it. But my experience, in the so called "evil nest" was a thing far removed from the placid tenor of life my Aunt was used to. She would never know the life of the Blue Mirror Lounge, nor of any life even remotely similar, for it was not of her day, her time, nor the essence of her era.

But, the Blue Mirror Lounge was an evil nest, in every aspect—not that anything basically evil had ever happened there. But it was evil as a hospital room (where abortions are done) is evil, or a blood stained room where someone has been murdered, or a bedroom where there is the smell of illicit sex.

As I stood but a step inside the swinging doors, doors made of shining blue mirrors, my suitcase in hand (dressed in classic black, seemingly the street clothes for all male dancers), and surveyed the interior, the blue mirrored walls, the blue carpet—wall to wall—sprinkled with fine glitter, the blue drapes—to match the carpet—and frosted blue walls where statues of white cherubims danced, lit by the diffused moonlight glow from the low ceiling, I sensed evil, perhaps, like a bull which senses death from the smell of blood in the arena.

I wanted to turn back at that moment, before venturing any further, before involving myself in something I could not back away from but, even as I thought these things, a man came toward me, wiping his hands on an apron tied about his waist.

"Can I help you, stranger?" he asked simply, as if in a hurry and wanted no interruption in his work behind the bar—a bar as black as onyx—with only two customers bulked like twin humpty-dumties near the extreme end.

"I am Tory Star," I answered politely, giving him a broad smile. I had learned to be polite, bouncing from nightclub to lounge to tavern from Sarasota, Florida up the Gulf Coast line. "The dancer." I added. "I believe you wanted an interview."

"Oh!" he siad, taken back. He reached out eagerly, and we shook hands. "I am Michael—Michael Harper, the one who answered your ad. May I take your things?" I handed him my suitcase.

"Come—I'll show you the dressing room."

I followed him the length of the lounge, a vast room to say the least, and through a narrow dark hall with the mens' toilet off one side and the dressing room directly off the other, if "room" it could be called. More like a clothes closet. A vanity dresser, a round mirror, like the ones out of the thirties, a vanity chair, a stretched wire with racks for clothes in one corner, and an extra chair, for guests he explained—a guest, of all things! At least there was a door, which could be locked from the inside, and a small lavatory for washing.

"Well, Mr. Star," he said, apologetic, smiling sheepishly, "it's not the star's dressing room at Paramount, but maybe it will do."

"It's fine," I said, thinking of some of the dressing rooms I had occupied. "But just call me Star." Then I said with a frown. "I do get the job, don't I?"

"Of course you get the job—er, Star," he assured, patting me on the back. Too eager, I thought.

"But you mentioned interview," I said. "Don't you want to see me dance?"

"Na, Star. That's not necessary. Besides, a friend of mine saw you dance once, at the Pink Canary in St. Petersburg, I believe."

I gulped.

"That hole in the wall!"

"It's okay. He kinda liked you. In fact, that's why I'm hiring you, on his recommendation."

"I can dance better now than when I worked there," I tried to apologize, remembering, which I didn't want to do. My whole life, especially from nineteen to my present twenty-six, had been a long line of unpleasant memories. What the hell! I'd make good this time. A has-been at Twenty-six! Unthinkable! Bad breaks, that was it, bad breaks. It wasn't that I was not good as a dancer. It was just that they couldn't pay my price. Too damn much talent for the money!

I was tired, weary from the long hot bus ride from Gulfport, Mississippi, the long stay over in New Orleans, then having to stand up all the way to Baton Rouge. I suppose I showed it, despair, unhappiness and all, for he gave me a thoughtful look and said:

"Star, you freshen up a bit, then come to the bar. We'll have a drink—a drink to your new job, your new career."

"Thanks," I said, needing both—his friendship and the drink. And as he hurried back into the lounge, I sized him up while I washed my face and hands, changed shirts, and combed my long dark hair, my pride and joy, for it went with my dark complexion, my green eyes, and my small dancer's build.

Firstly, I thought this Michael Harper either a little young to be tending a bar or, he fooled people with his age. Not over five feet seven in height, he was muscular in build, unique among bar tenders, had a riot of soft brown curls on his bland forehead,

doll eyes, with extra long curling lashes, and a little boy smile—appearing to me too innocent to be waiting on stubborn drunks, whores, and trouble makers, who usually frequent bars.

Returning, I sat down on one of the white leather swivel bar-chairs, which boasted an extra-modern curved back, and asked for a screw driver. Michael was occupied with another customer, or, what I thought was a customer, a thinish boy, seemingly no larger than a teen age girl, with a mop of white hair, teased in balloon fashion, tight jeans, and an orange draw knot blouse.

"Okay, Bambi, here's a dollar. Go pay the cab," Michael was saying, his expression serious as he turned from the cash register behind the bar and faced the boy who leaned half way over the counter, the crease of his behind showing plainly in his too-tight jeans. "But now watch it from now on. Your bill's climbing. Bet you don't even know how much you've run up."

"Oh, really now, Michael dear, of course I know," the boy called Bambi rambled on, fidgeting his buttocks, his hands going this way and that. "Know to the penny. Besides, dearie, you know my sugar daddy's got all the dough they allow you to put in the City National. I'll make him come by this week-end and pay up, or I just won't give over no more—if you know what I mean."

"I dig you, baby," Michael answered, and in a not-too-interested tone, almost automatic with his answer, as if he had said it a million times to a

million customers alike.

The boy left the bar in a flurry of motion, his trim figure disappearing behind the swinging doors.

Michael sat us both a drink and, after mopping up where the two fat men had sat, joined me. He pointed toward the door.

"Screwin' faggots worry hell outa me," he said, his lower lip cutting an oblique line across his sun-tanned face, another unusual quality about him, I noticed, comparing his with the milk white complexions of the bar-tenders I had rubbed elbows with down the coast line. "But," he shrugged. "They're purty good kids in a way. Always pay up. You have to kinda mother them, like you were a kindergarten teacher, or something."

"Wet nurse, eh?" I asked, making conversation.

He grunted. "About the size of it. I'm their fairy godmother, they think." He racks his eyes from right to left, looking beyond me.

I glance around, casing as usual, any joint where I work. I can pick out the good ones from the bad ones, sometimes, with but a tiny glance. I'm not sure with this bar.

"Is this a queer bar?" I nonchalantly ask. I had learned it was a tricky word among bar tenders. You can't be too harsh with your descriptions, especially when some of their fathers are queer.

I could tell he wanted to avoid answering.

"Well, it is and it isn't, Star," he said finally, not looking at me, his cornflower blue eyes on his drink. I notice how his bare arms, hard with muscle, flex;

the veins standing out plainly in the frosty blue light. "You see, this is a kind of out-of-the-way bar, not right downtown like the others. Well, here on Lafayette Street, with nothing west but the old Mississippi River, and the walled courtyard in back, it's kind of a "get away from it all" place. And popular too. At night the place is packed, and week ends, man . . . you can't squeeze in another one."

He still had not answered my question, so I try another way.

"But do you think my specialty—a Spanish dance—will go over in a Queer bar?"

"Go over!" he said, astounded. "It'll go over like Mae West in a logging camp! Listen, Star, you'll pack them in. With that dark skin, that slim waist, those flashing teeth. Why did you think I answered your ad? I know a good thing when I see it."

He had answered my question. It *was* a queer bar. But, deeply flattered by his comments, for the moment I did not mind. It was the money I was after anyway, queers or not, and the recognition. Working in a queer bar wasn't the last on the list. Hadn't that fellow, whats his name—Halon, Christus Halon, become world famous as a dancer in the movies. He started at the "My Oh My" in New Orleans. Dancing in a queer joint didn't make you queer, I figured.

"I hope I don't let you down, Michael," I say, flashing my smile again, a "must" in show business. Always smile, always look care-free, happy, with all your finances taken care of.

"You're gonna be good for this place," he assures me, leaning still closer to me. He was a good-looking boy, about my age, if that, and won me over to him immediately. Spontaneous! my Marine buddy would say. "I—the bar, needs your kind of talent right now, the place's dropping off. That last number we had on the stage. Boy, you shoulda seen him. Thought the vice squad was gonna close my place. You just can't book a male stripper. There's not a bar in the United States that'll hire one, if it knows from the first, which I admit, I didn't. Said he was a tap and toe dancer. Well, he was that all right, and more. You shoulda seen his jeans, Star. He had ripped out all the seams, then stitched them back, but with eachstitch about an inch apart. The slightest jerk, and off they ripped. I liked to dropped my own pants when he did that, cause cops come in here once and awhile, usually diked out like cowboys, want the clientele to think they're from the rodeo in Denham Springs. Hell, I know they're cops, went to Baton Rouge High with most of them, and even to L.S.U. Didn't know I played football, didya, Star?"

He leans back against the bar behind him, his image perched among the clean, shining glasses, the goblets stacked pyramid fashion along various glass levels.

I nod. It is easy to tell he was athletic.

"I don't play now," he went on, shy as a high school kid. "Not since my Uncle died and left me this place."

I am taken by surprise.

"This is your lounge?"

"Every spark and sparkle," he answers proudly, grinning to show even white teeth. "I quit out at L.S.U. Mama and Daddy sure raised hell. But, bullshit, I don't care. I got this. A better living than I could rake out if I had gone on to school—taking animal husbandry."

"You say it was your Uncle?"

"Well," he answers, dropping his eyes. "He wasn't exactly my blood uncle, but he was a friend of the family, and had no one to leave it to, and he took quite a shine to me, bought all my school clothes, car, anything I wanted, really."

"You're fortunate," I say, thinking how I had always scratched for myself, and was still scratching. I order another drink.

"Keep your money in your pants," he says commandingly, pushing back with both hands. "What the hell, I'm enjoying your company, Star. Business is slow this afternoon, no faggots to pester us, and what's one drink or two drinks or three drinks among old employees."

We both laugh then, and much of the weariness, despair, and lack of faith in my future slips away in the company of this young person, in this elegantly lit lounge, in this hospitable Louisiana atmosphere. I, somehow, gratefully, have a feeling of belonging, and God knows, I needed that. Playing nightly in crude road houses, all one night stands, rushing by bus from one to the other had taken its toll of my

patience, my ambition as a dancer really, and I bask in the warmth of this young man's acquaintance, this new start, this clean page, this renewal of faith.

Any star, any man with an ounce of ambition, occasionally needs renewal of faith—faith in others, as well as faith in himself. And this Michael Harper, it seems I have already known for a long time, and I say as much.

"Yes, we do hit it off," he says, "and for that reason you can call me by my nickname. I don't let everybody do that."

"I'd love to," I answer, and I mean this. "Just what is your nickname, Michael?"

"It's Micky, really," he says, and with the shyness of a kid—embarrassed—talking to grown ups. "I kinda like it myself, Star. Makes me feel like I was in high school again, you know. They use to call me that when it was Girls' Night graduating year."

"Girls' Night?" I asked, ignorant of the term.

He stirs his drink with a finger.

"You know. One night, just before graduation, all the senior boys have to dress up like girls and there's a beauty contest. Well, when I came out on the stage the high school band started to playing that number, "Micky, Pretty Micky," remember? I won the title of prettiest girl, I mean prettiest boy dressed up like a girl, or any way you want it, damnit!"

I couldn't help but laugh at him then.

"Anyway, they've called me Micky every since."

I salute him with my cold glass.

"Well Micky it is, and Micky it will stay," I said, smiling and pleased.

Our glasses touch.

The glass doors swing wide, and in walks a woman about forty, with auburn hair piled in masses over her head, eyes heavily painted, showing strain, her too buxom figure squeezed into a size too small dress of a thick brownish material, which clashes horribly with her red hair; drains her soft, carefully attended complexion to a pallid whiteness; and under the soft, deceiving lights, creates a sickly hue.

She comes straight to the bar, takes a stool next to mine, makes deliberate arranging gestures toward her hair, cutting her dark eyes in my direction repeatedly. I can see her through the mirror behind the bar as she orders a Creme de Menthe.

"Getting an early start, Mother?" Micky says, sitting the poisonously green drink before her.

Mother! I look at her then, point blank.

Micky introduces us. "She's a witch, but the only mother I've got, so I guess she'll have to do, broomstick and all."

I smile a greeting.

"Just call me Beatrice," she says, patting my arm. "Don't pay any attention to this son of mine, or me, either, for that matter. We're both headed for the fire pit." She gulps her drink, mannish fashion. At that, I detect

a coarseness I had not noticed at first. She has none of Micky's softness nor warmth, nor spontaneous ardour that wins people. She is hard, and about her is a callousness, which fails entirely to blend with Micky's warmth, his "little boy" attitude. It is difficult to believe that they are mother and son. I had seen so many like her in the bars in the South, that nostalgic Southern woman, the eternal coquette, who eternally considers herself pretty, even to young men like myself, and who, with everlasting stubborness, refuses to grow old, always dressing in young clothes, always caring for her figure, concerned for looks rather than comfort, fanatic with crash diets, and devout in the temple of the beauty salon. The eternal love goddess, who will continue to strive, yearning after beauty and youth, which have long since slipped away, leaving their companions heartbreak and misery, though she will never admit it—not even to herself. She sees herself as twenty-five and, in her delusion, faithfully believes that others see her the same. A Belle Watling, a tired, decadent Belle, her handsome good looks undermined by the crassness of man.

"So you're a dancer," she muses, dolefully, but with another interest, myself, and not my dancing career. Her dark eyes blaze, and I see a hunger written plainly on her broad face, a sex hunger rarely fulfilled.

"Star is going to bring this place back to life," Micky says, diverting his pale blue eyes from her to

me, then back to her again.

"It's about time," she adds, and there is a liquid thickness to her deeply southern drawl. "And I hope you bring in a different clientele," she says directly to me. "I loathe these slinky characters who patronize this lovely lounge. Their dusty wings simply give me the sneezes." Her eyes dart at Micky. "Wish to hell that old sugar daddy of yours had never willed you the place. I'm actually ashamed to meet any of my friends on the street; and to bring one of them in here . . . never!"

Micky's face twists in a frown, and his brow is taut with tiny wrinkles.

"Now don't start that again, Mother!" he says, his voice harsh. He glances at me. "It's the same old argument everytime we see each other. Ashamed to bring her friends here . . . and you should see what friends! Gossiping old ladies! 'Sell the place! Sell the place!' is all I hear, day in and day out."

"I think it is a beautiful place," I say, eyeing the joint as if for the first time. Their bickering is annoying me. I quickly finish my drink.

"It is a beautiful place," she agrees. "Fabulous! But I want Micky to complete his education, play football. Oh! I just adore football, don't you?"

I nod. I slide off the stool, my boredom acutely visible. I had learned to ignore politely, especially with women.

"I've got to find a place to stay," I say, which is the truth. I knew nothing about Baton Rouge, my

first trip actually, and the afternoon was half over. I needed to get out on the streets, to look around, to find myself in the strangeness of this town, to orient myself to its geography.

"I can recommend a place," Micky says, as if trying to keep me as long as possible. He takes a pad and pencil from the bar and thumbs through the dog-eared pages.

"Find him something nice, baby," his mother suggests, trying to be considerate.

"Lolly has a vacancy," he says, as if he is offering me the Hotel Astor. "Just down this street, the old stucco on the corner."

"Heavens forbid!" his mother shrieked. "Dear, can't you find this nice looking gentleman something better than Lolly's. You know what she has in there, a swishing faggot ballet! Star isn't that kind—are you, Star!"

"I should hope not," I answer, and notice Micky give me a side-long glance. I had not overlooked his mother's mention of his old sugar daddy (when he had said it was his uncle who had willed him this lounge) and I saw right off he was trying to hide something from me.

"Not any more," Micky says to her, his voice gruff. "She's kicked them all out, said they were worse than girls, wiping lipstick on her drapes, and stopping up the toilets with their crotch pieces!"

"Really, baby!"

Micky laughed, then gave me a sly wink.

"Lolly has only men who work at Kaiser Alu-

minium. Real he-men, like Star. He'll love the place."

"As long as it's private," I say. "And it's close to work."

He hands me a slip of paper with the address on it and, nodding politely to his mother, who is veiled in a wreath of smoke, I go back for my suitcase.

"See you at nine tonight," Micky calls after me when, about the same time four tall men—or boys—swarm into the lounge, the glass doors swinging wide, giving momentarily a wild whirl of reflections, closing again with a thud.

"Watch those doors!" Micky yells, pointing. "Hell! they're not made of cast-iron! What'll you queens have?"

"We were born in a castle with swinging doors, baby!" one of them chirps, swaying wildly, as the rest—their hip bones seemingly unjointed like puppets on strings, their tight jeans, some white, others a leaf brown, womanishly snug at the crotch, revealing nothing.

They flounder at the bar, swarming around Beatrice.

"Your clientele!" she snaps angrily, snatching up her enormous hand bag and sliding off the stool. "I'm going where there's fresh air!"

"Mother!" Micky scolded, his eyes burning after her.

"What ails that female bitch?" one of the queens complains, his bony elbows resting on the bar, his hands limp, like tiger lilies in full bloom.

"Watch it!" Micky says, but trying to smile. "That's my old woman."

"Shes *still* a bitch," the queen insisted. "Carrying on like a woman. Why, *I'm* more woman than she is."

"Lay off," Micky comes back, with finality.

Having to go to the head, I close the warped door, step over a pool of water on the concrete floor, and stand at the urinal. Corny, sex pictures, scribbled on the chocolate-colored wall jump at me. A cock and balls, with a mass of cut lines for hair, a crude figure of a male bending over, another standing in back of him, with the caption: "screw me, please!" And over the commode, cut deeply into the mortar, hastily, nervously, each sentence going downward, out of line, as if drawn in some kind of wild, fascinating tension, like sex itself, were the words: "I like young boys, age 14 to 16. Be here at ten if interested. Show hard." And further up on the wall, but with a neater stroke: "In case of an air raid get on commode. It's never been hit yet."

Finishing, I head for the dressing room across the hall and pass one of the tall scarecrow queens pivoting between me and the door facing on the way to the head. He gives me what he thinks a sexy glance and swishes past.

"One of the baser facts of life, dearie!" he coos, going into one of the stalls and closing the door, but leaving it slightly ajar.

Getting my suitcase, I go back through the lounge. Several more have come in, sitting down

the far end of the bar, their painted faces eaten up in the darkness and looking like ghosts, with halos of smoke encircling them.

"What a gorgeous number!" one of them says to the other, their heads together, as I pass. "Micky . . . who is that exquisite male?"

I overhear Micky say:

"That's Tory Star. He's working here now. A dancer."

"Oh! he's gonna drive my nellie heart right out of my nellie body!" one of them laments in a keen falsetto voice.

"Does he strip?" cries another . . . voices out of the darkness. Micky answers harshly

"Shit no!"

"That numbah don't *have* to strip," cooed another. "Ah can get mah rocks jes by lookin'."

Going through the doors and out onto the street, I am blinded by the intense glare of the sun which is low in the west, directly beyond the river. Squinting my eyes, coming so freshly out of that smoke-filled lounge, I go down Lafayette Street. Down toward the corner, and to the address Micky has given me. On this out-of-the-way street, the building walls exposing every crack, every depression from the direct rays of the sun, look ghostly with the shadows of trees moving along them, over the upstairs balconies which jut out like women's bosoms as they sit lazily in the sun, drawing the eyes of men. Potted plants line the sidewalk, hang from wires from the balconies, and fuse like a

jungle where open courts approached by long shady halls, lead back between the buildings . . . bringing to mind the ancient courts of the French Quarter in New Orleans, with trickling fountains, chairs made of Japanese bamboo, old flagstones of every conceivable hue, and moldy gutters, golden copper once, but now mint green, like a sunken ship brought up from the ocean depths. Huge urns sit like giant eggs, and crowned with Spanish dagger and rattlesnake fern, and elephant ear, which lip each other like the tongues of monsters, and tall watery banana trees, emerald in the fading light, elegant as silken sails in a breeze.

In the Mississippi river, down along the municipal docks, ships crowd together like elephants in the throes of a bath, their dark gray shapes lifting orange and green and white stacks to the sky, and north, toward Port Allen, a little ferry, red and white, and like the shades of the odd sternwheelers, slips into shore, gorging a string of teen-agers. Then further up, I see the spire of the capitol building, a gray sword of light, ruined by a giant spotlight on top . . . like a lighthouse . . . otherwise sublimely beautiful, a sword stuck up in the mossy crowns of live oak trees. And in this fall season, Indian summer, actually, with colorful leaves decorating the old gray stones, mingling with the sharp green of potted plants, and the ancient trees in the courtyard, somber and dark and meloncholy with dampness and age and surely nostalgic memory, the breeze lifting my dark hair, cool on my

face, lifted too my spirit, and I have the feeling I am going to like this place, this capitol city of Louisiana, with its French courts, foreign names, foreign ships, and the gaiety that seems to touch off in these people like putting a match to a firecracker on the fourth of July. That recklessness, that love for play, that taken-for-granted hospitality: all this I see and read in the faces of the people who pass me on the street, who smile and say hello, making you feel wanted, as though you belong. The house on the corner of Lafayette street is a hollow shell, like fortress walls surrounding a cool, shaded courtyard so crowded with a live oak, banana trees, spanish dagger, fern, and potted plants that, on entering it by way of a long narrow corridor through an iron gate, it is like entering a virgin jungle. The smell of rich earth, and mold, and water, and old stone invades your senses, your mind, and time and place seem of little moment.

Standing in the dense shade of that enormous courtyard, and looking up at the second story gallery which surrounds it, I am impressed by its grave, but graceful beauty.

Corinthian columns create the center of the stage, broken by a fountain singing with fallen water which, in long silver ringlets, slides over a bronze statue of a naked boy holding a goose. To these columns delicate, hand-wrought ornamental ironwork spread like lace the length of each gallery, and are choked with wistaria and flaming bougainvillea.

In the maw of this dense shade, the thick odor of jasmine, peppery rose, and the umbrella magnolia, creep into your nostrils and mind and you are possessed by something you cannot understand. With these strong scents are mingled the timid smells of oleander and the ginger lily, along with camellias, and amid these, the dripping fountain, which can never be monotonous, rather soothing, the old stones wet from the green plastic water hose which lies coiled like a snake, you feel that you have found peace at last. Here is tranquility, away from the long succession of bars, of colored lights, of drunken men and drunken women, and pawing hands, and smoke filled dungeons sunken in smelly alleyways, of urinals smelling of acid piss and lye and disinfectant; of stale food trapped for days in some smelly room, and paint and powder and gaudy decorations, and advertising signs, and neon lights blinking like flying saucer lights in your eyes, preventing sleep, and throaty coughs down some forgotten hall, and the sounds of old men sneezing and spitting, and cold water running from some loose faucet, of light bulbs staring you in the face, dark with old grease and spider webs, of creaky stairs, and mumbling voices like: we'll make it, baby, or, hush your damn mouth and go to sleep, or, give me a kiss, sugar, and the hushed, stealthy sounds of a key in a lock, shuffling feet, groping hands, old knotty hands, along your naked thighs, and cries, and women weeping, and the sharp bitter whang of a guitar and a young boy's voice, and the

far off singing of a woman, and a baby crying in the night, a train hurling itself through the darkness, and the blackness to shut out all the ugliness of the world, like a kind protector, and the dawn again to bring it all back, the stench, the ugliness, the poverty.

Yes, standing in this ancient garden, with the sounds of trickling water making it all the quieter, the humming of bees making it sinister, the fluttering of white butterflies making it all the more immense, is to me like ascending the first turf of heaven. Here, surely, Jesus tip-toed, as softly as if he walked on velvet.

"Looking for a place to stay?" came a feminine voice from the top of the gallery, awakening me from my reverie and, glancing up quickly, I see a dark woman looking down at me ... obviously Lolly.

I told her I was, who had sent me, and she motioned for me to come up the stairs. I obey.

"I have only one left," she says, as I stand but one step below her, "but I think you will like it. It's kind of private, and faces the river."

She was the Dorothy Lamour type, with jet black hair parted down the middle and drawn back in a knot; dark but radiant of skin, purely French, cool in a slim, simple sheath of pale green, naked legs with high heeled mint-green pumps, and her bare, plump arms haloed with bracelets. A huge diamond ring glittered on one finger enviously silver against the sparkle of her dark eyes, which

somehow were turbulent beneath, like an evil monster lurking beneath quiet waters.

She showed me through the apartment, which, with its high ceiling, tall windows and wide planked floors, looked cool and inviting, and it was furnished amply the pieces in harmony with the design of the building.

"You can add whatever you want," she invites, spreading her hands. "Pretend it's your home. That's the way I want my clients to feel. Is your luggage all you have, or will more be shipped in?"

"Some paintings and statues and a few choice pieces, and all my clothes and books," I tell her, thinking of the day I had packed them in my yellow stucco apartment on Pass A Grill Beach, south of St. Petersburg, Florida; and of Marilyn Monroe, who, having an apartment a few doors down from mine, had spoken casually to me on her way to the beach. I had lived high on the hog then, dancing at the Colonial club, and billed with names such as Nelson Eddy . . .

A thousand years ago!

"That will give the place an artistic touch," she says then, smiling a bright hot smile, and her dark eyes dance. She looked much younger when she smiled and, though surfacely calm, I noticed a tension about her, like a bird, poised yet undecided whether to flee or to remain. "I hope you like the other tenants. Mostly hard working boys, but genuine he-men." She pauses. "Micky called a moment ago, said you were on your way down. He said you

were a . . . a dancer."

I nod.

A frown clouds her face.

"I hope you're not like some he has sent . . ."

"I'm not," I say, interrupting her. My eyes are straight on hers.

I notice her flinch a little, but her frown fades.

"I'm glad. Didn't think you looked the—er—type. It's not that I cannot tolerate them, Mr. Star. A man or a woman has a perfect right to be whatever they want to be. It's just that they are so pushy with their way . . . like they want to thrust their kind on straight people, that we should feel proud and honored to share their life." She pauses then, and that tension creeps back again. She arches her back, her dark eyes distant, remote, as if she is seeing someone, or something through and on the other side of me, and I realize that something of this nature is worrying her, has concerned her deeply and remorsefully sometime during her past. "They would be alright, I guess," she went on, "if only . . . if only they would act like men."

"That seems to be the international opinion," I agree, still looking at her, trying to catch that certain answer which she takes such caution to hide. "I think most men would tolerate them if it wasn't for that feminine surface they insist on showing . . . as if they're trying to prove something by it. Why try to prove something already so obvious?"

"Why of course," she agrees, not smiling, not

even with her eyes. She suddenly looks tired, drained, and I feel I have said something wrong. "Oh, they still come here to see me. It's my fault I suppose. I'm always helping them with their drag clothes, or their little problems . . . like a mother. I think they look on all older women as a mother, that is, those who will give any time to them."

"Why do you spend time with them, Lolly?" I blurt out, before thinking.

She gives me a sharp eye, almost cutting, and I immediately regret having said what I did.

"Feel sorry for them, when I shouldn't. Loan them money when they are out of work and, God knows, they're out more than they're in. Half of them in this town can't hold a job for a week at a time, unless it is clerking, or hair styling, or something of that nature. The boss finds out right away, because they don't, or won't act right, and has to fire them, usually to save his own face. Most of them have an older friend . . . who half way supports them. Their sugar daddys." She gives me a know-it-all smile, her eyes smiling too from the top of her long black lashes, and I see from this instant I am going to like this prim French woman, for I detect something worldly in her, that cosmopolitan woman, superb in her dress and manner, broad-minded to a fault, and forgiving . . . because of some hurt in her own life. She, like me, I notice, has a past; one from which there is no permanent escape. We fool ourselves but momentarily. Like me, here in Baton Rouge, dancing at the Blue Mirror

Lounge, living at this apartment, I put up a great pretense, pretending something of permanence, shielding my past with a long charade of clever lies; a past that will crush me someday when I wake up and see myself as I really am, not the made up me, but me—Tory Star . . . no, that's not the real me, but Roy Brenson, from a one mule farm in the red hills of Mississippi.

But until that time—

Until that time I am Tory Star, Spanish dancer, from a long line of dancing Spanish Dons, schooled for years, a professional. And I will go on, seeking, striving desperately to find what I must find for myself, leaning on others, accommodating, selling myself, exposing my body, my spirit, even my soul to the anarchy of a world which I really despise, loathe, yet can never really escape. From city to city, from lounge to lounge, carrying out the sentence to which I have bound my life. And I never pause to consider if it is love I seek, or hate . . . hate of a world I left behind, from which I try vainly to escape; or one sex or then the other, seeking gratification with a desperation I cannot curb, and pretending that gratification is the essence of what I seek. Restless for something I cannot name. Wild for something still wilder, so wild it will never be tamed. A delirious runaway through the night of many cities, in the caves of many bars, in the jungle of concrete, in the gorges of tall brick and stone mountains, in the cliffs of dark windows, some of them lit warmly, thankfully, taking me in,

but only momentarily.

A beautiful, flaming firefly, flitting through the darkness, never settling on one flower for long, but on to those other, far more beautiful flowers (I think) that lie somewhere beyond the mountains.

CHAPTER TWO

The stage on which I dance at the Blue Mirror Lounge is round, standing out into the audience, where small round table tops of blue glass mirror surround me closely. The backdrop is silk, and as red as a Spanish shawl. Directly in front of this sits the small orchestra, made up of only four boys, who call themselves The Shieks.

I always began my dance, by standing so that my figure is in silhouette, my flat topped, wide brimmed hat with the chin cord squarely on my head, my left hand to my side holding a crimson cape, and my right holding a lighted cigarette, on which I puff as a prelude to action. Then, with the movement of a panther, ease out onto center stage. My black dancing costume fits like my skin, and I have always made sure it emphasized my maleness, never wearing underwear of any kind, nor a jockey strap to hold back the definition. In this lounge, I make double sure, for I know my au-

dience. My black boots, always kept in mint condition, are high heeled, the Charro, from the company in Texas which makes the most beautiful boots in the world. And my costume, tailored, is of black velveteen, from Giorgio Creations of New York. My cape is from Prince Consort, maker of silk ties and handkerchiefs in the Empire State building in New York. Though I have gone hungry during the past, and God! how well I remember those days ... like nightmares ... along Franklin Street in Tampa, Tampa's skid row, living in the Alamo Hotel by day, the streets by night, in the I.C. bar, along with other vagrants, and at dawn in the bread line for a bowl of soup, hard bread and unsweetened coffee at the Salvation Army behind the I.C.; sitting through a sermon to get a cinnamon bun and coke, and after the stores have closed, going through the refuse dumps behind grocery stores, culling out half rotten tomatoes, lettuce, damp moulded bread, coffee grounds, an apple, stale cheese, half eaten watermelons ... However hungry, I clung to my dancing outfit like a destitute old woman will cling to a memory, for they were my working clothes, my pride and joy ...

The small orchestra, picking up behind the sound of a bugle blowing "The Brave Bulls," I began to move my body in a way to show it off the most, more so in this bar, with its "male" audience, my heels tapping, lifting my thighs so they will catch the spotlight, turning my narrow waist so that my torso will pivot into the still faces of the audience,

careful that my maleness is the most outstanding quality of the dance, the message I convey, the bold description of sex.

There are cat calls that ride through the darkness toward me, like a ghostly siren, and high pitched voices, feminine, falsetto laughs, and I see faces awed to mask-like stillness beyond the spotlight, as they peer up at me through rings of blue smoke; see heads in groups, hands flying, fidgeting, cigarettes poised, the tiny red coals like frightening eyes staring at me through the darkness; see faces with dark, painted eyes, like dolls of china, tossed hair of every hue and sheen, soft sweaters, silken shirts, or blouses, long legs crossed negligently, feet swinging to the rhythm, like a woman in high heels, tight jeans, and dark suits, white dress shirts and shoe-string ties, and more faces smoked out in the blackness of the lounge, with only glittering eyes showing—eyes like pieces of chipped ice, or stars winking distantly, and more curly heads, some to their shoulders, like women, and dangling medallions the size of saucers, and hung by chains huge enough for harness, and lockets like necklaces and junk jewelry, and cheap gaudy bracelets hung on dangling arms like fetters, and cigarettes in long sequinned holders, and slender fingers toying with mint-leafed glasses, some gripping bottles of dark brown beer, in masculine—butch—fashion, others with delicate Pink Ladies, and gaudy Bloody Marys, and tiny glasses half hidden in fingers bloated with rings, and eyes! Thousands of eyes,

male Cleopatras, like sensuous cats peering out of the shadows.

"Never perform before a 'queer' audience," a show producer once said to me, informatively, "for they are the most critical audience in the world."

Yet, as I finish my dance under the blast of the bugle, engulfed in a thundering ovation, I knew I had captured this group. They were in the palms of my hands. And I knew even more as I sat down at the table Micky had reserved for me, and to which he brought me a drink, that I was in . . . permanently.

"You were magnificent!" Micky beams in praise, slapping me on the back. "You're drawing them in like flies to cow-piles!" he laughs.

Glancing over the bobbing heads, the sea of faces surging and blending into the dimness, I am surprised, happy and puzzled.

"But how did they find out so soon?"

"These queens!" Micky waved an arm. "One gets the word, they all know it in an hour. Damndest grapevine I ever saw. African drums can't hold a candle to 'em. Ever since those kids saw you this afternoon—remember, when you left to find a room?—they've been on the phone, calling every fruit in Baton Rouge. You're a sell-out, Star. Got to sign you to a contract to make you stay!"

"Nothing that drastic," I smile, sipping my drink. I'm still out of breath from my performance. I can feel perspiration crawling on my body. "I kind of like it here," I said. "Think I'll stay."

"That's what I like to hear," Micky grinned, gripping my shoulder. His pale, blue eyes stare down at me and I see his interest stirring in their depths. His face—the essence of his expression—sends my memory into the past, stirring the deeps of my past loneliness, that stifling void of loneliness in night streets, searching for something to fill its cavity—it awakens anew a hope I thought was gone forever.

Here was this person, I'd met only this afternoon, bending over me, his handsome face, his eyes, his voice speaking of need, making me feel wanted and worthwhile down deep within me, and I realize my eyes, staring up into his, are betraying that lost, that hungry loneliness, which, from pride, I had always tried to keep concealed.

But, it is almost impossible to be hungry and not look hungry and, though my expression betrayed this deep unhappiness which clung to my life so acutely, I manage to attain my pride by saying, and as casually as I could: "I'm a rolling stone at heart. Never could anchor at any one place for long ... you understand. That restless go, go, go, all the time." When I see his thwarted expression, I add, shrugging proudly: "Oh, a month, maybe ... two months, then off into the wild blue yonder."

He sits down then puts a hand on my arm. His warmth seeps into me. His blue eyes are steady on mine.

"Well, maybe so, Star. But keep thinking about it. Don't decide so quickly. Take your time." He

leans closer. "It's not always queens and faggots and old maids in britches. Hell, man! Women come if here too. You'll get to know them . . . in time."

His eyes are quizzical, disturbing in a way, and I try to read the question I see, dimly, behind them.

It was not the women, I confess to myself. God knows, I had had it with *them*. Nor that this was a queer bar. I had nothing against queers. I had rubbed elbows with them at Maderia Beach, at Crystal Beach, at Sun City, Valroy, Longboat Key, near Sarasota, those miles of sunny shorelines, and at the Yellow Tiger Lounge in Tampa, and amid swarming masses of them in Tallahassee, and in the town square at Mobile. I had learned long ago that, ordinarily, you had to give them the sign before they started advancing. The same as a woman. If she does not contribute the sign language she will never be picked up.

"Hey, Micky!" cries a high pitched voice near the bar, and I see a tall man (God! Queers are tall in Baton Rouge!) waving an arm, like some overbearing brat in school. "How about two beers for two dears?"

Micky frowns. "Duty calls, Star. Just make yourself comfortable. Look around. See how lucky you are. Why dig it, man, you won't have to buy your own drinks in here as long as you live!" He nudges me on the chin. "I'll be by and check on you when I can."

"You're too good," I say, and I think I mean it. The Mickys in this world are rare, and I had been

around enough to recognize one when I saw him. The true sport. Young and handsome enough to be gallant to all. The air of one wealthy enough to exercise his good-natured charm, like a beautiful woman, popular beyond compare and pleasant to all because she knows she is beautiful and is envied by every woman and man.

I watch him slip through the crowd, shying away now and then as some fruit tries to pinch him on the butt, embrace him, or engage him in conversation. He lets out just enough rope to keep them coming back for more, tolerating their coquetry, their pawing hands, their frequent, too bold, advances, and I am certain none of them will ever get to first base. They know this too, somehow, but they keep on trying.

"Those starving faggots will never give up," a voice says to me, as if it has read my thoughts and, turning, I am face to face with a man, middle aged or older, who is occupying the table next to mine, leaning so far back in his chair his shoulder brushes mine.

"Oh?" I answer, feigning indifference.

"I could not help but notice you watching Micky," he says, leaning a little closer. I skid my chair around, pretend to be adjusting my coat collar. "I've been here two years, and that same bitchy bunch has been chasing that poor bar-tender like a pack of bitchy hounds. It makes my ass hole stick out so far you could slice washers off it. Absolutely no up-bringing, no class. Why, when I

was in Los Angeles in show biz at least the "girls" held off until they got you alone . . . or in the dark. Why . . ."

"You're in show business?" I ask, as interest stirs. I always kept a sharp ear for people in the business who might help me.

"Well, not anymore," he says reluctantly, preening the fluffed-up red silk handkerchief thrust into his coat pocket. "Never was big time, Mr. Star, not really. Danced in the chorus line for quite a number of movie musicals, you know—the Betty Grable sort of thing. And at one time was the lead partner for . . . oh, what's that star's name? My nellie mind has gone blank. Anyway, I was headed for big time . . ."

"Well, that's something," I say, my interest lagging. I had been bored by this type before. Couldn't even remember the name of the picture's star! I knew I would have remembered, had I the chance to be a leading star's dancing partner in a movie, any movie. Another bragging faggot! "Why did you give it up?" I ask abruptly, perhaps too abruptly.

He bats his eyes, not with coquetry, but because of the lack of something to answer. He takes a quick, nervous drag at his cigarette, blows smoke which floods me in a blue cloud, and squashes the butt out on a tray already filled with charred remains.

"Well, you see, when my father passed away I was forced to come back here to this lousy town and stay with my mother. Then, well, you see . . ."

A pimple-faced boy with a mob of frazzled blond hair, the guitar strumming kind you see on record album covers, interrupts him to lean over the man's shoulder and, with a deeply southern drawl, that mountain drawl linked with Tennessee or Arkansas, say.

"Lay a five on me, pops."

The man turns round, marble eyes on him. His lower jaw sags.

"You must have grown four more inches on that root of yours, to expect that kind of money, Otis. Turned professional?"

"Don't give me no lip," the lad chuckles, his parted lips displaying two rows of dingy teeth. He gives me a sly, know-it-all wink, then centers his attention on the man who, eyeing me dejectedly, reaches for his wallet. "Got a thing going over at the Carrousel," the boy adds. "I'll pay you back, Paul—*sweetheart*!" He emphasises this last word, and in almost deliberate mockery.

The man, Paul, hands him a five.

"How are you going to pay it back, Otis? You haven't worked a day ... not since *I've* been in Baton Rouge."

The boy gives a nasal laugh. "Trade, Daddy-O ... trade!"

Paul gives him a serious, almost pleading look.

"Come by the house Friday night." And he sighs, "Please!"

The boy lifts an eyebrow, tosses his head playfully, a charade with his every gesture saying in big

letters NO.

"I'll be by early, and we'll have a stud ball!"

Paul grins, and with beguiled belief.

The boy squirms through the crowd, pausing occasionally to strike up a conversation with a number of the less feminine queens. Paul, a little abashed at having let his defenses down, turns back to me, his heavy lidded eyes wandering uncertainly.

"That's what wrong with this God-damned town," he says gratingly, folding his arms on my table, suddenly making himself at home. "Nothing but kid hustlers, hundreds of them. I've been all over the United States, notorious places ... like Fire Island, Pershing Square, the Vieux Carre, Chalmette, Audubon Park, on Bourbon, Dauphine, and Burgundy, the worst on Saturday nights ... but this town, Star, is packed with rotten kids who don't and won't go to school or work, and spend their day and half their nights hanging around Leggett's drug store asking for handouts. Like this Otis!"

I give him a stern look.

"Don't hand out money to them unless they put out," I advise, realizing that most kids, like this Otis, want only the money, and are foxy and wiggling out of their promised duties.

Paul shrugs. Lights another cigarette. The Shieks have stopped playing, and someone has dropped a quarter in the juke box, and "I Want Candy" is flooding the room, vibrating, and several queens began to twist their butts back and forth,

the brass buckles on their pirate belts gleaming faintly in the half-dark. Some, in matte Jersey garrison pants, look like high school girls, their sequined blouses picking up and reflecting the moonglow ceiling light.

"Guess I feel sorry for most of them," Paul says directly, moodily, his dark eyes piercing, like a tiny animal hemmed in a corner, almost frightening. He taps the ash tray with his cigarette. "Actually, Star, I never liked handing money over a bed once I've made it with a trick. Gives me a let-down feeling, like I'm not worth anything myself. It's embarrassing. I'd rather hand it out to them this way, like I'm helping them to a meal, smokes, a shower and a bunk for the night. It eases my conscience, really."

"But you hope they will put down later," I say, only making light conversation, for I care nothing for his blabbering.

He quickly glances away, then back to me.

"I suppose so. But ... they never do. But I blame most of it on the cops here, Star. They're nothing but kids themselves, went to school with most of these punks. They realize the score, and they never pick a kid up—even to frighten him a little would help, and this just encourages them. I know you are new here in town, Micky told me, and I can pass on to you some helpful advice (he thinks I am a queer). Leave these kids alone, especially these town kids. Oh, Otis is alright, he's from the country. But what gives me the red ass is that the

high school coaches tell these students all about queers, what to do to them, how to inform the police, and all that jazz ... and what makes it worse, and believe me, girl, I know. Half the athletic coaches here are gay as May dancers themselves. Anyway, Star, these punks here in town think they have a right to treat a gay anyway he sees fit, and be backed by the law and by his school teachers. And the truth of it is, the gays don't go to the punk trying to proposition him, it's the punk who tries to make the gay ... like this Otis. Why, trying to get into Leggett's on a Sunday morning for a paper or a cup of coffee is like trying to push your way through a buffalo stampede. Every kid has his palms up, begging for a hand out. Gripes my ass!"

A drunk queen rubs his crotch against my shoulder, then, with a gyrating of his hips, African-like, his arms over his head, cries out: "Let the good times roll, baby, let the good times roll!"

"You spoil these kids," I say to Paul, above the din, for I know he expects some kind of answer from me. "And you spoil it too for the other que ... gays. If these town kids carry on like pros, then treat them like pros. No hand-outs unless you get their tail first. Then, they'll either put out or shut up."

I shift my eyes from his gaze ... I can tell he is taking an interest in me ... and to the bar where

Micky, leaning over the bar, both hands loaded with mugs of beer, trying to serve several jazzy queens, dyked out in mod attire, over the head of a fat man whose rapt attention is locked on a kid in blue jeans seated next to him.

"I guess you're right," Paul continues, spurred that someone else seems concerned with his dilemma. "But, my salary comes easy, and it goes easy ... what the hell. What makes it so bad, Star, is that here in this mother town the worst mistake a gay can make is to go to bed with one of these sad punks in the first place. That one time spoils it. From then on he feels he's your lifetime obligation, that you have turned his keeper or something, just because you've had his erection which usually isn't worth a good lick in the first place ... if you know what I mean, dear." His dark eyes cut around at me. "Everytime they see you from then on they want a hand out, and please, baby, let me tell you, don't ever ... and I mean don't *ever* let one of them know where you live. They will bang on your door day and night. That's why the gays here move so often. It's worse than migrating geese, did you know that?"

"Why no ... had no idea," I answer, keying my voice to the pitch of his. He lifts an eyebrow, flirting. I hate myself for this.

The lounge is filling rapidly now, bobbing heads but silhouettes, all merging, gulped up by the darkness, as a brigade of young, overly feminine boys march in through the wide-flung doors, all dressed

in gaudy capris, turtle neck sweaters, making of their entrance a deliberate spectacle as an isle is automatically created for their swaying, gyrating passing. Many, their hair ballooned up over their brows, like cotton candy, their eyes painted ... Egyptian profiles ... necklaces strung from their shoulders, their flighty hands slicing the darkness, stones, cheap, garish, lighting up momentarily, like a struck match, their long white fingers, demand attention. Every pair of eyes in this lounge turn in their direction, if but a second, to case who they are. Not one of them is over five feet tall, the tiniest, most girlish queens I have ever seen, like teen age girls in boys' attire, or boys in tomboy clothes. Wasp waisted, belts gleaming, there is a scattered flitting of tones, like frightened birds, and I detect in their variety of dress crewnecked shetland pullovers, peacock cardigans, lamb's wool pullovers, campus and stadium coats, golden brown corduroy with matching vests, daks, soft velveteens with plunging V necks, revealing soft, frosty skin, pumpkin sweaters with grille designs, Edwardian frock coats, hound's-tooth-checked wool jackets, with epaulettes, slash pockets, tobacco colored wools, pearl-buttoned suede vests, Dutch boy caps, gold polka dots, black cabretta leather, wide belts of plaid. A mock array of styles from every port on the globe, and stylized to individual taste, a cuteness coming out of deeply masculine leathers and wools and Scottish plaids.

Paul punches me and, turning from the parade of

dolls, I see in his blazing eyes, as if heralding the agents of heaven, an acutely fawning expression, and he says pertly:

"The *Innest* set ... from the CAVE out on Florida Avenue."

"Really!" I remark, giving them one more deliberate scrutiny. "Is this Cave a Boy Scouts club?"

Paul giggles foolishly.

"Girl scouts, my dear. It's the most ... a gay lounge out on the outskirts of town. They go in flocks. This group, the *Innest* set, they call themselves, are always together. You couldn't pry them loose with a fingernail file. Their folks are spilling over with money, buy these kids anything they want. But they're stuck-up bitches, allow me to inform you, Star. And they know every exquisite butch number in town, all the go-go boys at L.S.U. and they patronize the footbeall team like it was their private harem. They probably give those boys a fortune to trick them. It just isn't fair."

"Oh, you probably get your share of the eh ... butch numbers," I declare, giving him the eye. He wiggles girlishly.

"I've had a few good tricks in my day," he brags, lifting his glass and tipping it eloquently to his lips. "There was this one kid from Lake Charles . . . my God was he hung! Let me tell you about him, Star. Well, one day I was driving ..."

"How you making out, Star," Micky says, leaning over me and giving me a slight hug around the shoulders, interrupting Paul with his sex pica-

resque.

"Why, it's like Ringling Brothers on sex exchange week," I answer, smiling up at him.

"Really!" Paul gasps, taking me literally. "That's something I've never heard, and I thought I'd heard it all. You mean all those gorgeous numbers in the circus exchange . . ."

". . . Partners," I complete his statement. "Only it's not wives and husbands, but husbands and husbands and wives and wives."

Paul and Micky laugh loosely, and I give Micky a wink.

"Don't tell him anymore, Star, or he'll be packing his bags first thing in the morning and heading for Florida."

"My dear!" Paul laments, rolling his eyes, his head screened in boiling cigarette smoke. "Why wait till . . . *morning*?"

Micky leans a little closer.

"Would you care to go out into the courtyard? It's a bit cooler, and I'll bring you out a drink."

I quickly agreed, for the lounge was jammed, butt to crotch, and the juke box was too loud for my taste. I nodded to Paul, though I was not anxious to prolong our conversation. He immediately sensed my reluctance, my false invitation.

"I . . . I think I'll remain here for awhile, Star, I see someone at the bar, an old friend actually, but thanks . . . thanks anyway."

He gives me a snotty smile.

Micky escorts me through the crowded lounge,

past the hall where the toilet and dressing room are, and through a tall iron gate that leads out onto a spacious flagstone courtyard lit only by multi-colored carriage lamps around the stone wall. There was a fountain, which trickled inky water floating pastel water lilies, and an uneven array of wooden chairs, benches and tables painted a flat green. The high wall was bordered with tropical plants, mostly Spanish dagger and banana, which looked wet, their fronds shining like polished plastic in the colored light.

"What a nice surprise," I say honestly, as we push our way through a group of feminine boys and several punk kids in leather jackets, boots, and motorcycle caps, to a faded green table in the far corner, it's vacant square glowing from a red carriage lamp which hung above it on the wall.

"I like it," Micky answers, glancing round. He wipes off one of the chairs with his bar rag. "It gets hot as hell here in the summer and most of the kids like to come out here to shoot the crap and flirt, and score, as you know. It's kinda homey. Sometimes when everyone is gone and I'm closing up, I come out here with a cold beer and just sit by myself and gaze at the stars . . . kinda crazy, eh?"

"Not at all," I say, and I understand this about him. That loneliness digging into you, yet still wanting to be alone. "I like to be by myself a lot too."

"You know, I figured that out about you, Star.

For you don't talk much. Bored with all this crap too, I guess?"

I nod, as my eyes flit from his to the group around the fountain. It was difficult to tell the boys ... boy boy's ... from the girls ... boygirls ... or who was trying to make who.

Beyond them I notice wrought iron steps leading up to a small overhanging gallery and a glass paneled door. I call Micky's attention to it. Doors had always excited me, for they could lead to so many wonderful, and despairing, things.

"Oh that," he says, glancing up. "That's my hide-a-way. I call it *Back Of the Moon*, read that in some novel, 'Leave Her To Heaven,' I think. A small apartment, really. Sometimes when I'm beat, or blue, or down in the dumps I sleep up there. It's my ... get-away-from-it-all!"

"You need that too, I see," I say seriously, without smiling, thinking I was the only one left in the world who needed to get away. "It's hard to picture you wanting to get away from it all."

"What makes you say that?"

Faintly I could hear the juke box playing, and I recognize the tune: "Cheryl's Going Home."

"Oh," I answer. "You're so young, so full of life ... likeable, everybody likes you, Micky, I just can't picture you ever being sad."

"I'm the great pretender," he says, swelling his chest, the opening of his collar revealing a neat patch of golden hair. "I act the fool a lot, especially around these clowns, but mostly I get my kicks

reading, listening to music, and seeing a show now and then. Oh, I'm still cock and balls over football that's my game, but . . . but since I took over this lounge, seeing all this Sodom and Gomorrah with the veil off I guess I grew up a little, or hardened, or something."

"You sound unhappy," I say, sitting down in the chair he had brushed off, and seeing in my memory the long months of unhappiness, living from hand to mouth, from one bed to the next, one body to another, one unhappiness to another unhappiness, as if I wouldn't or couldn't or didn't care to learn any better.

He shrugged, dragging his gaze from mine to the iron gates, as if something there held his attention. With his legs spread apart, he popped his bar rag unconsciously, wetting his lower lip with his tongue.

"No such thing as happiness, Star." Then he laughs, as if by that laugh he wishes to change the subject. "Happiness is found only in books . . . and what you find with the head of your penis."

I am about to add a smart-ass answer to that when a tall man approaches our table and greets Micky with the air of a tycoon addressing a porter. Then, his body stiff, he turns to me.

"I've heard about your dance, Star. If you'll permit me to join you?"

I nod. "Why sure, of course."

Micky gives me a dull stare, clicks his teeth, and saunters off.

"I'll bring you fellows a drink," he says over his shoulder, as he moves away.

The man seats himself and leans back comfortably, but with a stiff dignity, laying his hands on the table.

"Micky and I are not the best of friends," he says, shifting his eyes in that direction, then immediately back to me. "Let us say, we both share a mutual liking for the same thing ... which could result in our becoming devastating enemies. He's a gorgeous boy but, I'm positive, a little below my, shall we say, rank? Allow me to present myself. I am Corinthian (he might as well had said he was Zeus, with the air which he said it, the pompous pride) "from a long established line of southern aristocracy. My family came to Baton Rouge back in 1699, when the town then was known as Istrouma, during the time of Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, and Thomas Jefferson, when Louisiana covered 828,000 square miles. Interesting don't you think?"

"Decidedly so," I answer, thinking what a companion he would have been for my great-Aunt. And without letting him know it, I study this pompous ass seated before me. His hair, oily dark, shining from an application of oil, is brushed forward like that of Napoleon Bonaparte, framing a hard, high-cheekboned face, cold moveless eyes, slit lips, and a protruding chin pock-marked with acne. About forty, he sits rigidly, his shoulders held purposely back, haughty, the flesh-and-blood image of what you might see in paintings in dark stuffy museums

in the Quarter in New Orleans. I do not like him from the first, for I see immediately in him something he wants to be and is not, the aura of something he has created, like an actor who creates a character, through make up, voice control, and physical manner, burying what really lies beneath which, usually in such a case, is far more entertaining than that he has created from the mind.

"I'm sorry I missed your dance," he muses, taking a pale blue cigarette from a gold case, his manicured nails shining in the red light, offering me one politely, which I accept just as politely, and lights us from a lighter the shape of a Grecian urn. "But I've had a most dreadful day. This morning it was coffee with friends at the Piccadilly, a fitting at Holmes for a Sterling and Hunt, a business appointment at Rip's Huddle, a steam bath this afternoon, a show at Jack Tarr's, with friends again at the Hunt Room, now here, and late . . . too late I'm afraid."

Blowing smoke from my nose, I ask pleasantly: "Expecting someone?"

"Well, er, yes and no, Star. This acquaintance . . . well, he's from the horse farms at Saint Gabriel, and, oh, about a week ago I was in pursuit of a Tennessee walker, and this person demonstrated the horse for me, the one in which I am interested. I hope to see him tonight. Do you delve in the homo-philos, or is that a leading question?"

I am ready with an answer.

"I try to be cosmopolitan."

He nods his head slowly, his immobile eyes like hot glass.

"Were are you from, Star?"

"Sarasota." I lie.

"Oh, Sarasota, not much culture there, is there?"

"Culture now, in most American cities, is a state of mind."

He smiles a frozen smile.

"Have you met the Fulton Murats, originally from New Orleans, who have settled in Sarasota for some twenty years now?"

"Yes," I come back quickly, as casually as I can muster. "They sat at our table one night at the Colonial Club at Pass A Grille Beach in St. Petersburg. I was with the Loyolas (a trapeze pair in the circus).

"Ah," he returns as quickly, and with the identical casual significance. "An old family. My family knows them well." He then shifts his interest. "I cannot but help being aware of your costume, Star. May I ask of your tailor?"

I tell him without blinking an eye. "Burdine's, in Miami." I do not ask him about his tailor, for I do not want him to harbor the illusion I am in the least interested. Micky brings our drink, silently, his lips stubbornly protruding, and puts them before us.

"Is the breeze too cool for you out here?" he asks, directing his voice at me, though keeping his head bowed. "I can fix a place for you in the

lounge." He cuts a quicksilver eye at Corinthian. "Anytime you get bored, just say the word."

I tell him I'm alright, not to fuss over me, and he leaves, not too happy I think.

"If I wasn't a gentleman," Corinthian says then, preening the quilted threads on his silk jacket, "I could cut him to the quick. But I cannot be cruel." He says this in such a way as to advertise just how cruel he is. "Nature, or God, never intended for he and I to share the same mattress." He twists down his lower lip, letting out a smile of ridicule a haughty smile which adds to his lack of warmth and charm. "I come here too often. I am beginning to talk like those—those Mata Haris in the lounge. Will you forgive my impertinence?"

"There's nothing to forgive."

I notice that he is not listening to me, his steady gaze drawn to something at the extremity of the courtyard and, turning my own gaze in that direction I see, framed in the black wrought iron work of the two gates the most handsome boy I have ever seen, and I had seen many at the Ringling Brother's circus winter quarters, which boasts the most beautiful performers in the world.

He is short—not over five feet four—and young, twenty at the most. His hair is amber gold, or so it appeared under the carriage lamps, and as thick as wool on a sheep's back, curling in hundreds of ringlets which toppled over his brow, and just above his eyes, eyes as clean as air, and as transparent. He was male personified, masculine to his fin-

gertips, with a moody beauty edging on something ethereal, savage, a wraith from somewhere out of the past, or perhaps in the far flung future, but not of the present. For there is about him something nobler than other youths, something electric, so spontaneous I seem to feel, as I gaze, something coming from him, a magnetic force . . . which adds all the more to his fine form, the darkness of his features, his male handsomeness.

One of the queens near the center of the courtyard, whose attention, (like everyone else's present) is upon the boy, says, aghast:

"My God! What is a boy like *that* doing in a place like this?"

He has echoed my own question, and my sentiments.

Another one chirps:

"Queer bait . . . if I've ever seen it!"

I agreed to that too. And I wondered how he was ever going to get out of here alive.

"That's him now," announced Corinthian, and with the certainty of a diety peering down on one of his angels. "You know, the one at Saint Gabriel." He stands up. "Glad I met you, Star. I am looking forward to seeing you dance." He takes a card from a tiny gold case. "Here is my address. I usually have open house after the lounge closes, but, unfortunately not tonight. You can't miss it, Star. The old antebellum mansion on Ardenwood."

He slipped through the spell bound mob, like Caesar might have at the appearance of Anthony.

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When he was gone, the two making their way through the dim border-line world of the lounge, one of the queens in the courtyard, running his slim fingers through his bleached hair, muttered deliriously:

"That sucking Corinthian, you might know if anyone in this mangy town latched on to that gorgeous, gorgeous creature, it'd be him . . . Mr. Baton Rouge, Mr. Louisiana. Mr. United States, Mr. Universe."

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CHAPTER THREE

It is mid-afternoon. Fall weather has set in, but today is unusually warm, the sky is pure blue, cloudless, and there is just wind enough to keep the golden leaves falling around me, lending a spirit almost of festivity.

I am in the courtyard of the Blue Mirror Lounge, seated beneath the shade of a poplar which grows in one corner of the yard, thumbing idly through a September copy of Esquire, taking note of the latest in fall wear. Lapels are cut off square near the navel, double-breasted suits are trying to come back, and blazers are all the rage.

On the other side of the courtyard, in a little patch of sunshine, sits Micky, going over the accounts, His head bowed, his curly hair tumbling into his eyes. He is barefoot, dressed in pale gray plaid shorts and a white T-shirt. I noticed how shapely were his naked legs, thick at the calves and flat of thigh, and how the bright light turned the

hair on them a bronze-gold. Looking up from my book, for the sunlight has str aked across the page and the reflection blinds me momentarily, I see him and take note of his legs beneath the table. I have always admired shapely legs on a man, especially if they were thick, hard, and cased with curves. Why I admired mens legs, I had no idea, but I had always admired qualities about the male physique other men made it a point to shun, and I did not regard myself less masculine for doing so. In fact, I always considered, that admiring the beauty of other men would help greatly toward keeping my own body in good shape, my appearance preened and in as good health and dress as I could manage. After all, my body in a way, was my profession, and I saw nothing queer or strange in admiring the male physique.

Yes, I long knew, the male body was even sensuous to me. It had its sex appeal. It had its magnetic quality, its hold on others, just as the female body, carries with its form a certain attraction, and to both sexes.

You handsome devil, I thought, as I watched him from across the courtyard. He seems my only friend in the world. Of all the people I had met and liked during my past, had known, loved, hated, admired, Micky seems to dominate them all. His shining face, his pale eyes, like the innocent eyes of a child that has never looked on sin, his soft pink lips, stand out vibrantly, dulling all the other faces in my past to dimness. Even in this lounge, working

as a dancer, having lived in Baton Rouge almost a month now, Micky dominates all the people I have met, and I have met a lot of them in this lounge. Mostly queens, faggots, hustlers, old maid aunts, but none the less people . . . people with hopes and dreams and ideas and failings and, mostly, a vast amount of unhappiness. They all were unhappy, in one sense or another . . . exiled from the society which had borne them and reared them, but to which they could never return. They are a sad lot, I think, as their faces troop before my mind. Sad because they have signed their own death warrants in the life to which they have sentenced themselves, and there is no going back to that old life . . . ever. The young ones, eagerly approaching the gilded threshold of this new sparkling world they have but recently entered, ridiculing the older ones who, grown fat or bald, turned drug addicts, cannot make it on their own except by paying, and the older ones deliriously hated the younger ones which, in flesh and blood, represent the youth which they have placed on the altar of worship. The old pro hating the young because he is made responsible for the young's meat and bread, his keep, his "lettuce"; and the young whore hating him for paying. And worst of all, which I have seen in this very lounge, is the old hustler, no longer young, no longer good looking, with nothing to attract a score, and with no money, for he had spent it as fast as he made it. A dollar here, five there, mostly ten, and rarer (if ever) twenty.

They're aced out, as I have learned, since this town is not a town for hustlers, young nor old. Their faces become too familiar and over a too-short period of time. They have made the rounds of all the scores in less than a month. If they are good at their trade perhaps a second or third time around, but the vicious circle is the same. Scores, especially the older who have the money to pay, want new, fresh faces. Once or twice is all right, but the same face nightly on the streets becomes quickly avoided. A new crop, year after year, as high school graduates are flushed out on their own, the cycle renews itself. Three months later the old unhappiness reigns again, for both the hustler and the score. Only large cities, I know from working in them, keep the supply and demand in balance without exhausting the freshness of it. And as I sit and think these things, watching pensively Micky up to his neck in figures, the leaves falling, the shade and sunlight moving over this courtyard fancifully as a dream, I wonder, and there erupts in my heart a sadness, and a feeling of hating society, those who have never seen, have no inkling of this side to life (nor know that it even exists) for having shunned these people so ruthlessly, turning their so-called "normal" backs on them, while they went their so called normal way. And deep in my heart, for I have mingled with these faces, these phantom shapes from whom society turns its head when they pass, these ghosts of an underground world, ghosts I see now sweep through this courtyard in some

kind of frivolous gaiety, ghosts which become, radically, invisible to that straight world when they are forced, through lack of funds, to work with them, to attend school with them, to sit with them in church, to share their parks, and playgrounds, and swimming pools, and dance halls, and even cemeteries, I cannot force myself to blame the victims, but the victimizers.

And once you have crossed this boundary, not through any kind of intimacy, but through daily life with them, heard their problems . . . as you hear the straight world's problems ... share in their hopes, their dreams, their travails, then you really see the gap, the mile wide crevice which cruelly separates one group from the other. And you get to see, even more so, and even with a clarity you never thought possible, the parallel minuteness of the two. Just as there is a similarity between the male and female, with only the clothes that separates the two likenesses, you detect it in these two groups, with only the covering above to hide the reality beneath.

Sitting in this lounge, and in many others similar to it during my restless migration—from what?—and listening to them pour out to me, night after night, their experiences, all you have to do is close your eyes, and you can easily imagine you are listening to one of the "straights." It is the same pattern, with one exception (and this is the saddest of all) that only those like him, and never the straights, can ever understand him. A suffering

minority (while with the straights it is a universal suffering) for their woes can be told in homes, before their families, in the church, before their pastor, at their jobs, before their fellow-employees, at the clubs, before their friends, and at schools and at colleges, before their teachers and counsellors.

Nothing is so sad, nor devastating to the spirit, as to be in trouble, or engulfed in some terrible, secret unhappiness, and not have an understanding soul to turn to in that hour of need.

Tinker Bell comes into the courtyard, from through the darkness of the lounge, and he is but a midget echo to all that I am thinking about his kind. A doll homo, about four feet tall, but his brave smile, and his carelessly tossed hand, brings to mind what a man once related to me in the Tiger Lounge in downtown Tampa. "Star, my ignorant boy," he had said. "Queers are the happiest people in the world!"

Micky gets up from his accounts to wait on Tinker Bell, and when he returns, he comes over to where I am sitting and props one naked leg on the seat of my chair. Leaning over, giving my dark hair a slight caress, he says teasingly:

"Trying to solve all the problems of the world?"

"I don't follow you."

"I've been watching you for at least an hour. You haven't even glanced at that magazine, just staring into space. Are you unhappy here at the lounge with me?"

"Of course not," I answer, and with truth. And I

tell him what I have been thinking.

"It's as old as the Caesars . . . nah, still older," he says, philosophically. "Even in the songs of Solomon, and the dreams of David and Daniel. And I think it's here to stay."

We both laugh.

"Which brings to mind a question," he adds, looking down at me in a quizzical manner, his blue eyes twinkling in the fine fall light. "Night after night, day in and day out, you sit in my lounge, you talk to many people . . . people who like you, Star, interesting people, and popular people I must add, and when they leave they leave alone, and when you leave you leave alone. I have never seen you pair off with anyone, Star."

"Does this worry you, Micky?" I try to laugh. I realize he has spoken the truth.

"No, it does not worry me." He shakes his head stubbornly, his curls tossing recklessly. "Yeah, hell yes it worries me! It just isn't natural."

"Now wait a minute, Micky, just what isn't natural?"

"Hell, Star, you're a good-looking boy, stacked like a brick backhouse. And you're old enough not to be a complete novice. I'm sure that some time or other . . . some lucky queen has . . ."

"Why do you say *lucky* queen?" I interrupt.

He swallows hard, and for a moment his face turns crimson.

"Well," he says finally, not looking at me, but at Tinker Bell feeding the parrot in its cage on the

other side of the courtyard, "you are probably hung like a mule, and I'm positive a number of the classier queens have tried to put the make on you. I just don't get it! Looks like a robust male like you would weaken sometime and give them a thrill."

I toy with him for awhile, enjoying his curiosity.

"Well, you are healthy, good-looking, Micky, do the queens ever give you a thrill?"

"Nah!" he says, shaking his head. "Look, but don't touch. That's my creed."

"Looks like you borrowed mine," I say, clicking my tongue between my teeth.

"You mean ... you've never been touched by another man?"

He leans closer, as if challenging me. His eyes match the wintry skies, blue as a promised heaven.

"Never," I say, and with deliberate assurance, looking him straight in the eye.

"God! You're mysterious!"

"So are you, if you, too, are a novice."

"That's different."

"How different?"

"Because, I work behind a bar, own the place, so I am naturally thrown together with them ... but you, you do like to be here at night, for some reason."

"I like to be with you."

I laugh boistrously.

"Crap! I bet you do!"

"I really do," I say, flirtily and, unconsciously, lay an arm on his knee.

There is a serious gaze in his eyes.

"If I only felt you really meant it, Star, it'd make me proud."

Something magnetic leaped between us.

I choked, swallowing hard. My face felt flushed, warm, glowing.

"You know I like you, Micky."

"I'm fond . . . I like you too, Star."

I see the reflection of falling leaves in his watery eyes.

"No man has ever—really?"

I shake my head.

"No, Micky, never. I must confess, I am fascinated by some of them, but I am fascinated by many things. Long ago my aim in life was to throw aside all the shackles of my mind and to learn as much as I could about people, about the world. I have always had a wild curiosity about people, what makes them tick, from an early age. I want to feel that I am born free, to accept those around me, and not to want to change them nor alter them to suit my own, perhaps, narrow views. I've always had a vivid, lusty hold on nature, and things, and folks. Being alone," and I found myself pouring out my life, my thoughts. "Being alone, traveling alone, with no roots, no ties, I figure in this way it is easier for a lone man to go down than up. It's my own battle against life, and I want to read a lot and learn and meet many different kinds of people, to share, even if but momentarily, a part of their lives. I want to open them up and look into them for a

moment, see into their hearts for a little while, walk into their worlds. I know this all sounds mysterious. Like one man said about me, that I was a male Garbo."

"I like it," he says lowly, his eyes firmly on mine, and he lays a warm hand on the nape of my neck. "You *are* mysterious, but for real, not just acting mysterious, or odd, like some poeple try to be. That is *why* you are mysterious, I guess, because you don't try to be mysterious. You sure have my customers puzzled."

"I don't mean to," I suggest, comforted in his presence."

"Have you seen the latest on the crapper walls?"

I shake my head. "My world readings haven't taken me that far."

"It says: 'twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are'." He sticks out his lips. "I wonder what you are too, Star."

"I try to be ordinary," I explain, glad in my heart, and to the very core, that someone in the world cares if I live or die. "Most of all, I suppose, I want to be a man, a real man, mannerly, educated, a bit suave, a bit reckless, but not to the extreme; to be able to converse with almost anyone, from a peasant farmer in Brazil to the President of the United States, and to understand the people I know and grow to love. Like these people in this lounge, I don't pity them. They wouldn't want that. Nor do I feel superior. But I feel, Micky, that if I am a true man in their eyes, and at the same

time willing to talk to them, sit with them, share their life, they will, in time, feel that I respect them, regardless of their sex life, and they—in turn—respect me. That is the one thing I see wrong in this homosexual world . . . the utter lack of respect for one another. And these people want respect, not their respect for others so much as others' respect for them. They're not bad, immoral, sex seducers, preying on little children, ignoring the Bible, religion; refusing to live with a society that has shut them out. These people are real flesh and blood people, many with deep insights, fine character, and morals. I hope that in some way that I can lend help to them. I don't mean by that to design a uniform for them, a flag, and march on Washington. Though, with all this other civil rights movements, it's not a bad idea. *They* are the persecuted ones in this world. I just hope I can contribute to their support, to lift the veil which so overshadows their world, to bring them up out of the dark ages of that stuffy Victorian world; wash away that monstrous impression the world has that these are not fit to live among the masses."

A trace of tears shimmers on the rims of his eyes, and looking down at me still, as I talked, he caressed my neck with strong, brown fingers.

"There's nobody like you, Star, just nobody," he whispers, and, taking his hand from my neck, he lays it on my arm that rests along his knee. "But do you think, if you ever have the opportunity to lend a helping hand, that you will be defying, or

betraying your own world?"

I had thought of this, considered it many times, and I was prepared for my answer.

"No . . . I think not. Don't get the wrong impression, Micky. I have no dreams of being a male Joan of Arc to these people. Its just that I do not want to see a society like ours split, especially by a lack of knowledge, or an abundance of ignorance. But I do harbor a dream of one day seeing all of us together, in one common society. It may be a long way off, far up ahead in the future. But I want to be a prophet for the moment, if you want to listen."

"You bet," he says, and I see a trace of love in his eyes.

"I see man and woman walking in the society of the future being whatever they want to be, and without feelings of shame, or bigotry, or lawlessness. I see man and man loving one another, and woman and woman loving one another, visiting in peoples' homes, homes of the straights, then not-straights for they will all regard one another as the same. I see two men attending church hand in hand, and two women, which ever is the case, and being welcomed, and being asked genuinely about their lives together, their plans, their hopes. I see two men, or even one man being able to adopt a child, if he or they desire; or two women, or one woman, for these people love children as much as do others. I see marriages performed publicly, and double tombstones in cemeteries, and joint bank accounts, and joint tax returns, and two people of

the same sex on mortgages, and two names on one automobile title, and joint insurance policies. A small hope, but, Micky, if I help a little, as others will someday do, it will be like a lantern let down into a dark well. A small light, but at least a light."

I glance up, over the wall, to the north to the state capitol building rising into the heavens, and I think of the misery of my own past life ... a straight ... and what could have been avoided if only a little knowledge and understanding could have sifted through the barrier of bigotry.

"Do you feel then that you will ever have sexual relations with another man?" Micky asks, and there is deep urgency in his tone, and I notice fine beads of sweat on his brow, his upper lip. I answer quietly:

"I don't know. I wish I did know. But I don't. My life with women has not brought me happiness, fulfillment. Marriage has been only one more stumbling block further into the cellar of darkness. But what is fulfillment, really? Is it something everlasting for two people in love, or is it a transient thing ... a fleeting moment grabbed up in the night, only to be lost at dawn? Are any two people truly happy?"

"I don't know," he says, his brow wrinkling, like a small boy who has been asked a complicated question, and cannot find an answer.

"I can truthfully say this," I continue, hopeful, by baring my own thoughts, beliefs, that I can unlock the doors to Micky. "In the past few years I

have altered my beliefs about lots of things. Because I read a lot, I've searched out numerous subjects such as scientology and mediumship and ghosts and reincarnation and numerology and astrology and metaphysics—the Rosicrucians the ancient Mayans and telepaths and spiritual aid, even voodoo and flying saucers."

He studies for a moment. He shouts across the courtyard:

"Hey, Tinker Bell! go get us all a beer. It's on the house."

He turns back to me, his blue eyes blazing like arc-lights.

"The saucers interest me."

"They do me too," I add. "As they would anyone, with one spark of intelligence. I cannot imagine any man not boiling over with curiosity, for think what it would be in the history of the world if men from other worlds made a landing here."

Tinker Bell returns and sets our beer on the table.

"You think they have their sex life whipped?" Micky asks, herding our conversation back to sex and the implications of homosexuality.

"If they can build ships which can come to earth from other star systems, then surely sex gives them few problems."

"Maybe the saucer men are all queer."

"Really, Micky. How could they replenish their race?"

"Oh . . . artificial sperm—or some other means."

"They *could* be sexless," I surmise, trying not to smile. "Uniting only when the female is fertile, or perhaps both sperm and egg from male and female could be taken from them and united in an incubator. That way, they could see their child grow."

"How morbid! Besides, there'd be no fun in that!"

I look up at him, and I know, shamefully, that my expression betrays me.

"Does sex interest you so much?"

"Doesn't it interest every man?"

"You answered my question with a question."

He breathes hard. His hair is damp from sweat, and falls in oily ringlets over his eyes.

"I'm interested in your interest—or what your interest is in sex."

He has me checkmated.

"My interest may alter . . . from time to time," I say, pondering as I speak, remembering the torture of my past, which, is like a pursuer on my trail. "At the moment it is nil . . . jaded too, mainly because I have yet to meet the person who provokes passion enough within me to pursue it."

"But a female only?"

I take a sip of my beer, relishing the frosty mug and the white foam over my lips, gauging his question. We are fighting a duel with words and both jockeying to find the weakness of the other. But even this leads on to adventure.

"I am not above going to bed with a male," I say at last, daring to look him in the eye. I hear a

chuckle from Tinker Bell who, playing in the water at the fountain like a small child, has overheard me. "But, understand, Micky, not just *any* male. It would have to be someone . . . well, I don't know yet. As I said earlier, I have altered my beliefs about many things."

He blows the suds off his beer and eyes me curiously.

"Name them. I'd like to hear. I haven't talked like this to anyone in a long time, and I'm enjoying it immensely."

I think for a moment.

"Religion for one, I say. "If you don't mind discussing religion."

He waves his beer mug in indication to go ahead.

"When I was small," I began, "I was brought up strictly; to believe certain things pertaining to God, to Jesus Christ, to heaven and to hell. I never questioned them. All my childhood life I had lived practically within touch of my great aunt's Bible. She willed it to me incidently, and I still have it, one of my most cherished possessions. Anyway, I never saw any reason to question the good book. It was all there in black and white, and written so long ago, and miracles seemed so natural to the bible. But—one day, about two years ago—I was browsing around in an old book store in Terra Cela, Florida and came across a book translated from an old parchment found in 1880, and near the same place where the Bedouin boy found the Dead Sea scrolls. It was in the form of a letter, written from

one Jewish Elder to another; an Elder who had acutally lived in the day of Jesus, and knew him and his Disciples personally. He was at the crucifixion and helped Joseph and Nicodemus take Jesus down from the cross, and saw the blood and water still running from Jesus's side, and knew (as *they* knew) that he was still alive, unconscious of course but still alive. You know, blood does not flow from a corpse. It congeals. They put him in the tomb, covered him with healing oils and herbs and he came to, and they took him away before dawn. They hid him in Galilee until he was better, then made him, for his safety, go to Egypt where he lived out his life in peace. I have read that many times, Micky, and it seems to alter, in a remote way, my earlier conceptions, the taken-for-granted facts out of my childhood."

He looks at me a long intent look as I finish.

"Do you believe he lived?" he asks, awed by my story, as all who have been who have ever heard it.

"I don't really know," I answer, and a surge of passion wells up within me. "But I hope so, Micky. I hoped he lived. For isn't that all any of us ask, to live out our lives in peace, to do what our hearts dictate, as we were born to be? He never had a chance; spent his whole boyhood in learning with the Elders. He was nothing but a poor hungry heart, haunted and hunted to his death. Yes, I hope he lived, so that he could be as other men."

We finished our beers in silence then, not speaking, drowned, I suppose in thoughts too deep and

personal to voice. Finally he lifted my chin with a thumb and forefinger and searched my face, my eyes.

"You mean so that he could partake of the passions, the love, the joy essentially and rightfully man's?"

"Yes, that's what I mean, I think," looking at him seriously, our eyes welded together by the forces of our hearts, my voice shaking a little. "Why should one man be denied what millions have?"

"Why do you deny yourself?" he asks, his chin stubbornly protruding, his eyes naked with question. "You have yourself to account for."

I give a light sigh, enjoying, actually, my denial. Sacrifice at times can be sweet, filled with sad satisfaction.

"Waiting, I guess, Micky, and I know this sounds silly, a little Victorian; waiting for the right person. Not a one-nighter, but someone I would have to know for a long time, and I am speaking of both sexes. If a woman, then more than I have ever known or understood any woman, and if a man . . . well, once I decided to cross into their world . . ."

"Yes!" he mutters impatiently.

"Once I went across I would want to be sure. So I wouldn't ever cross back to this side again."

CHAPTER FOUR

It is Monday night and, like most bars throughout the cities of America on this night, the Blue Mirror Lounge becomes a hustling bar. The scores and the hustlers, having made out on Friday and Saturday nights, and recovering through Sunday, the hustlers, low on funds, start prowling at dusk.

Some scores have related to me that Monday night is the best scoring night in the week. Of course, none of this interests me.

Winter has set in with continuous rain, wind, and an occasional freeze. Sitting in the lounge, warming my belly with a drink, in my black topcoat, the wide collar pulled up around my neck, my black gloves placed neatly on the glass table. I have finished my dance, gone to my apartment to change, and am back again after a movie. The rain is coming down in torrents outside, and the queens, looking stuffed ... like teddy bears ... in their McGregors, bright Melton Jackets, pile-lined corduroy, their Fleur Du Jour Vill Shirts, their suave Dorchester blazers, swarm in, wabbling, chattering like a group of Chinese laundrymen ... passing out greetings, hugging, settling in small groups, hip-swaying it past a blue denim-clad kid with Stetson hat and cowboy boots leaning at one end of the bar; swishing merrily around a squad of black leather jacketed, acne faced punks, coquettish, displaying their wares. Advertising!

Bambi is dancing with Tinker Bell, both in shiny black boots (Tinker Bell's more like booties they're so small) both in bright red pull-overs, their buttocks giving it the bump and grind, bringing forth a rash of shrill giggles from a table occupied by at least ten faggots, some six footers, some four feet, a strange menagerie. Paul wiggles by with a bright, "Hi, Star," going on to the bar. He has spied the good looking cowboy. And others prance in and past me, speaking gaily; many I have sat and drunk with since coming to this town; have known something of their lives, their habits—mostly their weaknesses. Billie John, who teaches baton at L. S. U., Clay a male clerk, Bobby Vee a Toddle House cook, Bootie . . . who has oversized buttocks and who takes up movie tickets, and Poppy, a retired female impersonator from the My Oh My in New Orleans. Charles De Armas an ex-con from Angola who couldn't go straight, Virgil who comes on strong the first half of the night, a sex maniac. He is usually drunk by midnight. Elmira the male vamp . . . too, too feminine to be true, Vallette the religious chalk artist who likes it in the back door, and big burly Opelousas accommodating this type, and all the others: Teche and Homer and Bringer and Lemarque and Cook and Ptolemy, and then the more effeminate ones . . . those with trumped up names which seemingly fit their certain brand of personality . . . Bonny and Chuck and Butch and Tony and Rock and Barney and Tuffy and Bubba . . . boys' names for girl types . . . and

even old, fat Eliza is here tonight—the only woman score I have ever seen in my life, who stands outside the mens room propositioning fruity, young kids as they come out.

The rain, the constant banging of the front doors, letting in mist and a wild draft, the unceasing rat chatter, the loud—my God! too loud music ... someone is hung up on that tune "Monday Monday" ... playing it over and over. The constant parading, like it was Easter Sunday, and the dark, mean glances of the male hustlers, and those who are not hustlers at all ... tramps, bums, small town country boys coming in curiously to look over the joint, see the fruits, those determinedly after money and loot, or both, and the lurking ones, usually sitting in the shadows, peering out like dirty animals from a den, waiting ... waiting for some gullible victim: all are beginning to annoy me, to press on my nerves. There has been no letter from my ex-wife, not one word from my son, they have moved from their old address, and to be cut off (even though I don't give a damn really) guts me with a terrible loneliness and I have a sudden compulsion to walk out of this gory lounge, go to my apartment, pack my things, call a moving van for my works of art, my statues, my records, and vamoose to another town, another dark city, more taverns, bars, dance halls, new places, new faces. Too, the haunting face of my kid brother—God how I have wronged him—cuts sharp, copper plate-like images across my brain, as if by acid. I cannot

shake him out of my thoughts. I glance at these silly kids, boys making it like girls . . . or trying to . . . and I see his face. No! I mustn't think about him . . . ever.

Then, to add to my present misery, Micky has not bothered to come over except to bring me a drink and to let out a quiet hello. Misery loves company, I think to myself, remembering an old saying of my Aunt's. She had one for everything. Many I had remembered.

The juke box is wailing out "Monday Monday" again, for the hundredth time, and a twisty faggot is standing in front of it, dressed in skin tight animal print capri's, with fringe on them! and a black silk blouse. His hair is carrot red, and his skin is so white, buttermilk white, it looks as if the fiery red hair has drained into the strands every ounce of blood from his body. A tall, robust boy, in thick cream colored jeans, a wide black belt, and chocolate brown pull over, glides up to him, puts an arm around his shoulder. The red haired boy's hand, shot with rings, slips down to the boys crotch, cups it. They go out together.

Micky comes over, brightening my otherwise drab, droll evening.

"Bet you're wearing underwear tonight," he says, smiling as ever, my rock of Gibralter. A rose in this garden of weeds. "Getting cold as hell. I've been wanting to talk to you, Star, ever since we had that long conversation about sex . . . remember?"

I nod. Tinker Bell passes in a swish. He is fol-

lowed by another boy, not two inches taller.

"Looks like the two midgets have finally gotten together," Micky says, pointing with a thumb. "Those two have been skirting each other for the past two years, won't even speak. I guess this cold weather is drawing them to the same mattress ... which reminds me, what I wanted to talk to you about." He rubs his chin. His brow is furrowed in wrinkles.

I look up at him seriously.

"You're not going to fire me are you?"

"Christ! Star, nothing like that," he says, laughing. "This place would fold up." He leans on the back of a chair. The standing-up crowd merges in. A straying hand slips around his middle. He turns sharply to the feminine boy to which the hand belongs.

"Get *you*, girl!" he spits. "*You've* been had before!"

"You're not very romantic tonight," I say, eyeing him, cocky.

"These God damned sex starved ..." he didn't finish. He chokes. He begins again, turning his face in disgust. "What I wanted to say, before I was sexually interrupted: Star, on bad nights like this, when you're here late, no use going home through the bad weather. Go on upstairs to my apartment above the courtyard. Anytime—just call it home."

"Thanks," I answer, "Is this a proposition?"

I shouldn't have said that.

He stands up jerkily, his hands on his hips. I

have wounded his masculinity, and I realize this profoundly.

"Goddamn! can't a man be your friend?"

Though there are thousands of words I can say to this, from the bottomless crevice of my eternal loneliness, I can return nothing. I know the expression I turn on him is a stupid one.

He is mad, but in a moment more he smoothes it over with a broad grin. Maybe I had thrown kindling on the fire. He winks.

"See you later, sexy," he whispers, and deftly blows a kiss. He is determined to hold our mutual friendship, and ashamed, I realize, despite his lovable ways, that I do little to encourage it. Man kills the thing he loves. The brave man with a sword. The coward with a kiss.

What is happening to me? My old spontaneity. What had happened to it? Why have I grown so cold?

Micky starts to leave, but turns back.

"You won't ever take advantage of my offer, will you? You will do me like you do everybody else in this bar. You won't ever come up will you?"

I think for a minute, toying with my drink, make tiny round circles of water beneath my glass. I cannot look up into his eyes.

"Maybe," is all I can say.

"I'm not going to bite you ... if that's what you're thinking."

"Oh, I know that," I stammer, snuffing out my cigar. "It's just that—that these gossiping queens,

if they saw me go up there they'd have you and me living as man and wife, married to each other, and you know it. Look how they practically ruined that Nunez and little Hendee."

"Screw these nellie bitches!" he says, leaning once more on the back of the empty chair. "Do you think I give a damn? Hell no! Listen, I own this lounge, every table, every chair, every glass, every bottle, even that paint and powder pissery, and if I don't like what some swishing faggot says about me I'll kick her out on her hairy ass!"

I am amused by this. "I believe you would too, Micky."

"You damn well know it. I want us to be friends, Star, hell. You have no one. I have no one. We like one another, don't we?"

"Sure," I say, independent ... too independent. I could have softened up to him, a little.

"It's our life. I don't mean I want to screw you in the behind, Star, or give you a blow job, or something. I like you, and would like for us to be together as much as possible. Why, if any one of these glory hole queens said one word about you, why ... I'd pull his pussy out by the roots, balls and all!"

"I'll buy that," came an unfamiliar voice from directly behind me, "I feel about Star the same way."

Turning swiftly, an almost about face, I am startled to see the handsome blond boy I had seen but momentarily in the courtyard. He is smiling, a

broad smile, displaying two rows of glistening white teeth, and his eyes, even in this dark room, blaze like tiny lights illumined from within.

"Are you waiting for anyone, Star?" he asks, pointing to the three vacant chairs.

"Why no, please join me," I say before I think. Micky cuts me a sharp, hurtful eye.

"See you, Star," he mutters, wedging his way through the crowd.

"Thanks, Star," the boy says, having a chair next to mine. "I've heard quite a bit about you . . . all good too. My name's Suny Martin."

"You're Corinthian's friend aren't you?" I ask, remembering that night vividly, when his image was brought up sharply before me.

"Well, I am and I ain't," he answers, blushing a little. "I train horses for a living. That's how I met Corinthian. He's been bugging me ever since."

I laugh beneath my breath, greedily glad that *that* high-and-mighty queer was not making out. No, he had not made out with this good looking boy.

"I thought you and him were hitting it off nicely," I say, pouring oil on the water. My curiosity had gotten the better of me.

He shrugs.

"Oh, at first, cause then I didn't know the score. Now I do."

"He came on big . . . eh?"

He grins. "Well, he made a few improper advances, shall we say?" He bows his head a little, his

eyes on the table. "Don't get me wrong, Star. I'm not above a thrill . . . if it's with the right person. But, I'm not a pushover, and I won't accept money for something I feel should be a privilege shared by both. I'm not cheap, Star."

That one declaration makes me genuinely fond of this boy.

"You're a rarity in this world," I say to him kindly. "And should be congratulated. But, I too feel as you do. If I am to cross that barrier, I want to cross it with someone worth my while, in friendship and devotion—not in dollars and cents."

"I know you are like that, Star," he murmurs, his voice low, deeply masculine. He places his elbows on the table, crosses his hands from one bicep to the other. The sheen of his dark blue top coat, in constant highlights of glitter from the raindrops banked up on the wrinkles, in contrast with his silver-lit eyes and damp tousled hair, makes him a novelty in this bar. "Just *how* I know you are like that," he continues, "I don't know. No one has told me. But I sensed it, somehow. You can sense things like that can't you? Anyway, I have been wanting to meet you, to talk to you, to get to know you. You're not like the others in this place."

I consider this a compliment, and I want to do something for this strikingly handsome kid . . . out of my deep loneliness, that dark, aching emptiness that dwelled inside me, a demon I could not pluck out.

"Can I buy you a drink?" I suggest, eyeing him

with admiration.

"Let *me* buy them, Star," he insists, lifting his hand. "If I let you pay, you'll get the impression I'm a hustler, or something."

"Never!" I insist, shaking my head. "You're just not the type, Suny."

He goes to the bar and returns shortly with two beers. He is still half-drenched, his curls clinging above his dancing eyes, a watery Neptune fresh from the sea, and when he sits down, he snugs the top coat around him tightly, shivering.

"You cold?"

"A little," he says, smiling, then shrugs it off with. "It doesn't matter. Don't worry about me."

But I *was* worrying about him. An unusual thing for me. I was finding too, even with this first meeting, I was gathering a sudden warmth . . . like an elf gathering fire coals . . . for him; little hints and gestures, minute things I notice about him. The thickness of his lips, almost square, the way they fold back when he laughs, his heavy arched eyebrows, the long curling lashes around his huge eyes, the curls that sweep over the top of his ears, his square wrists, his thick fingers, short, the golden hair on his forearms, the calm manner of his deportment, his regular shivering, like a small boy running through the rain, washed clean, pure, innocent of sin, sex, like the rain soaked petal of a flower . . . that you want to put in your mouth and suck out the water. Strange, I want to cuddle him, especially when his shoulders shake, when he

laughs shyly, a little recklessly, want to protect him.

Am I turning queer?

I began to shiver too now, not from the cold, but from my own fears, fears of being washed up in the never to-be-escaped tide of this place, these people, these fairy people, this world of anarchy.

"I've seen you dance, Star," he says, sipping his beer like a kid tasting it for the first time, and not deciding whether he is enjoying it or not. "I liked it so much I keep coming back."

"Strange," I add. "That I've never seen you ... but that once."

"I usually stay at the far end of the bar, toward the doors, it is dark there, and I can see if Corinthian comes in looking for me." He laughs softly. "I can dodge him that way. When he comes in I go around him and out the door before he notices."

I enjoy this sly pleasure with him. He seems to get a great kick out of giving Corinthian a chase. I brave to ask.

"Does he try to dominate you?"

"He tries, but it doesn't work. Oh, when he calls me he is all sugar and spice, but when we are in a public place together he turns cold as a lizard ... gives the orders ... like he's my keeper or something ... or I'm his concubine."

"But he must want you desperately."

He is silent for a while. He sips his beer, glances up from his glass at intervals to case the crowd.

"I don't think he wants me *really*," he says at

last. "I don't think Corinthian wants *anyone* for that matter. Too proud, too vain. Wants to be aloof. You are aloof too, Star, but in a different way, a mysterious way. Corinthian is aloof and you know he—he likes men, but you are aloof, and one can never tell what you like. That is good, I think. I try to be like that. Corinthian thinks I am handsome. He has told me so, says I am the best looking boy he has ever seen. And for this reason he wants to be seen with me in public. This sounds like I am bragging, but I'm not."

"I don't think so." And I add: "Anyone would be proud to be seen with you. It lifts their own reputation a notch or two."

He grins.

"Thanks. But even if I consented to . . . to go to bed with Corinthian, even if he kept me up, gave me plenty of money, I wouldn't want him, or the arrangement. His kind tires too easily. They are so wrapped up in themselves and the level of their own popularity they have to go on to other, more attractive conquests. Too, Corinthian is cruel . . . the very opposite of what I would seek for sexual pleasures."

"I cannot picture you going to bed with any man," I say to him then, leaning closer to him, our voices drowned out with that God damned Monday Monday on the juke box.

A thin, girlish queen, made slimmer still by emerald leotards, white tennis shoes and a corduroy jacket thrown loosely over his shoulders, gives

his hips a burlesque grind, winking at Suny.

He returns a twisted down lower lip, cut sharply at one corner, as a half-accepted challenge, then he eyes me abruptly. His grin at me sweeps over his face like a lover's dream.

"These cats sure give me the creeps," he says, which puts them in their place, by the numbers. "Never could dig that type. Is it true, Star, that they shave around their box and take in the bottom, on their backs, like a real woman?"

I shrug, that I-don't-really-know shrug.

"I've heard tell it's been done."

"I would think that a physical impossibility," he sums it up, eyeing me, then cuttingly at several close to our table, who keep preening their costumes, their silver eyes, ever watchful for a glance from him. One half-interested glance, and they will pounce.

"Man sure has some odd ways of getting his kicks," he rambles on, grinning, his hands, with the skin drawn so smoothly over them, the basic evidence of youth, toying with his beer mug. "I bet no two in this place go for the same thing, or do whatever they do alike. Kinda fascinating though, huh?"

"It has its moments," I assure him, enjoying him immensely, his steady warmth which flows over me like warm oil. "What is one man's sickness is another man's cure."

He laughs out loud, throwing back his head, like a small boy that has been tickled in the sides.

"I like that, Star!" His sudden glee turns a number of eyes in our direction. Micky's for one. He is glaring at us tormentedly. His bluish-lit face framed by two giddy queens trying to make out with the cowboy who is still standing at the end of the bar.

The crowd around us take up the cue, laughing too, and the bar, momentarily, is rocking. Micky sidles over to us.

"You two queens having a ball?" he asks jokingly, looking from me to Suny, then back to me again, a cocky gleam in his eyes. "Or, did somebody drop an ice cube in Suny's girdle?"

"Neither," Suny answers readily, laughing up at Micky. "Star and I are in love and can't help but laughing over our happiness."

This is a thorn in Micky's side. His eyes go vacant with pain. He attempts a wry smile, but it does not work. It turns out to be a grim mask rather than a smile.

The giggles cease abruptly as Corinthian, like a figure carved from granite, his terrible frozen snake's eyes peering at Suny and I from the shadows.

"Coming with me, Suny?" he says coldly, not moving a muscle, his figure a head and shoulders above the other brash queens who are enjoying this immensely.

Suny looks at me, his pale eyes determined.

"Sorry . . . I'm with Star."

"Oh," Corinthian returns, his voice drained of all

emotion. "The sex dancer. Slipping, Suny?"

Suny gives him a pert look, rising from the chair.

"No ... social climbing," he answers surprisingly. He takes me by the arm. "Come, Star. Let's get out of here."

I follow obediently, mainly for no other reason than to put this haughty Corinthian down, but not to wound Micky who, a little crestfallen, gazes absently after us.

Hurrying through the swinging doors and out onto the drenched steps, Suny turns to me apologetically.

"Hope I didn't say anything wrong, Star. But that Corinthian ...!"

"You were perfect," I answer, thrilled to the core, remembering vaguely one of my aunt's old sayings: the still hog always gets the slops.

On the wet sidewalk, standing in the downpour, are two rough-looking boys, burly as football players, their eyes wantonly wicked staring up at us. They are dressed out in black leather jackets with silver-tipped epaulettes, double rows of silver buttons down the front, slashed pockets from which tiny silver chains dangled. Their jeans, thick but so tight their crotchs bulged, their black motorcycle boots mud splashed to the thighs, and on their heads, horse hair, thick, coarse, which lay plastered to their foreheads and cheeks, Dutch caps underset at a jaunty angle. Their faces, lantern-jawed, pock marked with acne, broken out in pimples, filthy, peering.

"Can I take you home, Star?" one of them asks, stepping up a step nearer, touching the visor of his cap, like a man would do when addressing a lady. "You get that fine suit and that fine coat ruined in this here weather."

His voice is nasal, thick with the low country brogue, not that of the Cajuns who dwell in the Bayou territory, but of the sections west, toward Lafayette and Lake Charles.

"Never mind, punk," Suny says crudely, gripping me by the shoulders. "Can't you see I'm taking Star home."

The other one advances. He catches hold of my arm.

"Please, Mr. Star. We jes' seen yo' dance, an' we'd be delighted to take yo' home . . . jes' anytime man, jes' anytime."

I jerk my arm from his grasp. He backs down a step.

"Never mind," I say as roughly as I can.

Suny and I wedge through them, hurrying through the rain and to his car, a black Mustang, which is parked on Florida Avenue.

We drive to my apartment without speaking, the wild swish of water banked up at the corner of North and Lafayette streets roaring under the wheels of the car like water beneath a boat We come to an abrupt halt in front of my place and, with reluctance, but still wanting to know this fine kid more, I ask him if he wants to come up.

"I'd love to, Star," he answers surprisingly.

"But, suppose I go by the Toddle House on Florida and bring us back a hamburger steak and coffee? Won't take thirty minutes."

"Good," I say, slipping out of the black bucket seat and toward the entrance. He drives off as noiseless as an eel. When I start through the hall to the courtyard, dodging the puddles which have filled up the uneven places along the stones, I hear the sharp racket of an engine. A motorcycle, plowing through the backed-up water along the street, comes slowly in my direction. It's the two rogues Suny and I had seen at the entrance of the Blue Mirror Lounge. I dùck behind the iron gate. One of them sees me. He waves a friendly wave. I wave back, hopeful that is all it will be to it, and rush up the stairs to my apartment. I cut on the lights, my nerves jumbled for a moment, and began to straighten things for Suny's arrival. I fix clean plates and cups on a tray, one my brother-in-law had brought back from Korea, napkins, and take them into the living room and set them on the coffee table. Then stripping, I took a hot shower, thinking that I had better re-dress before he returned, for to be disrobed might appear suggestive. No sooner was I under the shower than the door bell rang. Knotting a towel about me, I turned off the shower and hurried to the door. That thirty minutes had gone awfully fast.

I jerked open the door, not caring really whether I was naked or not. I gasped. It was the two boys!

"Howdy, Mr. Star," one of them says, pushing

his way into the room. The other one follows suit, taking long lazy strides, his feet wide apart, his fists thrust into his front pockets.

"You can't come in here," I cry, my heart thumping. "I'm expecting someone ... in a few minutes."

"Cain't we now, Mr. Star," the first one murmurs, pushing back his Dutch cap, his insolent eyes dull, like an animal wounded and seeking vengence. "Ain't gonna ruffle you none. Scared! Ha!" he lets out a rough, exultant laugh. It chills me to the bone. He closes the door slowly, careful not to make any noise. My heart leaps to my throat. He turns the lock.

"Now, we're all alone, aren't we, baby?" he says, rubbing his hands together. "Two big brawny he-boys for you to drag on, Star—cain't I call you Star? Course I can." He comes closer.

"I'm no queer," I deny, truthfully. And I add jeeringly: "And, if I was, I sure wouldn't go for the likes of you."

"My, but you're high and mighty," the first one says, jockeying closer with his steps, his hands spread wide. "Is it custom-custoom-merry for us to kiss you 'fore or after you go down on us?"

I back back a step, forgetting I am naked save for a towel. There was a pistol in my bedroom dresser drawer, a relic from World War II, but I realize I can never make it. I try bluffing.

"What do you boys want, really? Not a queer. You're too much man for that, now aren't you?

Money—is it money? Whatever it is, get it and get out! My buddy will be here any minute, and he'll . . ."

"He'll do what?" the first one stutters, his dark eyes blazing, frightful beneath his bushy head of hair. With hands of steel he grabs me by the shoulders, pulls me roughly to him, smiling a mocking smile that makes me want to kill him. His callous, acne-infected face brushes mine, and to my nostrils comes a rancid odor of his breath, burned from whiskey; the stench of unbathed skin, of hair stale with cheap pomade, of tobacco. "We want you, Star. We want you!" He laughs again, a Bela Lugosi laugh, that vampire cry which tingles the length of my spine, and I sense this is all some kind of terrifying tease.

"Leave me alone!" I yell, jerking away from him, that teasing laugh priming me with a courage I do not know I have. "You stinking bastard!"

He slaps me full across the face. The sound rings in the still room. Suddenly I see millions of stars. Everything turns blinding white. I stumble, try to keep my balance.

"Let's put the rod to him," the other growls, his voice strangely animal, like the baying of something fierce, wild. He gropes at his crotch, unzips his pants, withdraws his organ. He skins it back and forth, playfully, enjoying, animal-like, its enormous swelling. "Ah got somethin' here tha'd choke a bull," he grunts, his eyes, rolling back until I see the whites of them, deadly, hideous, evil, almost

like the eyes of a dead man.

He advances, his back arched, his enormous thighs spread. I almost panic. He lifts the towel, runs his grease smeared hand up my leg, round to the back, underneath. He lets out a laugh, or, more like a growl, his yellow teeth, coated, bared like a wolf's.

"Knock off that crap!" the other one demands, robust, more intelligent, if there was any intelligence at all—in either of them, the leader quality. "We didn't come here for that!"

Then he lunges at me. Grabbing me by the neck, as if he is trying to strangle me, he shoves me back against the wall, his rancid body, hard of muscle, so hard I can feel the pressure of his thighs, his chest, his ribs pressing into me, and he pounds my head against the wall, stunningly as he talks.

"Listen you," he spits, his lips so close to mine they are burned by his breath. "Don't you give me no airs about you not being no fruit. I know what goes on at that lousy Blue Mirror lounge . . . all perverts, understand? Queers! Fruits! Fairies! Queens! Every rod-gobblin' one of them! They've *all* got money! And they're afraid to squeal to the cops, see? 'fraid to death of the fuzz. And you know why . . . I'll tell you why (he keeps knocking my head against the wall, between each word) they'll get put in jail themselves, for screwing around with kids, see? Now you do what I say, and if you squeal, so help me, you fruit bastard, I'll come back up here and I'll kill you."

He eases his grip.

I try to squirm free, but he presses harder against me with his huge ox-like body, his breath heaving maddeningly, as in the throes of passion. I feel his hard thighs, his protruding crotch jabbing into my groin, and the terror, like I've never known, flashes through me in a wild, terrifying dream. And I manage to cry meekly, summoning courage.

"What do you want me to do?"

"We don't want your ass! If that's what you're wishing!"

I feel faint, with sudden relief.

"Money, baby, cabbage!" the other says, leering close to me, his long fingers out, their nails black with grease, pale skinned, from lack of proper food.

"I have very little on me," I say, hopeful they will take it and go. "There in my wallet." I point to the bed. He lunges toward it, jerks it open, pulls out a twenty and a one.

"This is the brokest queer ah evah seen," he spits back at the other one. "Ah guess he'll jes have to write some checks." He pulls out a wad of blanks from his rear pocket.

The one pressing against me cries frantically. He has worked up a sweat, which adds to his body stench and, with his back to the other one, who is fumbling through the wad of blank checks, trying to unfold them neatly, his wide, dripping mouth goes over mine, and his body suddenly collapses against me. I feel his tongue probing, and, with all

the strength in my small body, I jerk away from him.

He reels, his whole body at odds with his senses, his mouth, gaped like a cavern, dripping, his eyes, molten with passion, staring bitterly, crazily at me.

I recoil.

"Who's calling who a queer?" I half scream, bracing myself against the wall, groping for the towel that has slipped during the struggle.

His eyes narrow at the accusing backlash of my words, numbed by his own guilt, and fearful of the other boy's finding out (he still stands stupidly, straightening the papers in his hands).

Like lightning, the one who has kissed me, flings out a fist and it strikes me on the mouth. Before I can recover another hits my forehead, just above my left eye. I reel, as sharp knife-like pain flashes through me. Blood runs down my face, into one eye.

He quickly jerks the checks from the other boy's hands and, taking a ball point pen from his jacket, bends over me menacingly.

"Which bank you got your money in?" he growls, fumbling among the loose blank checks.

"None here," I manage to whisper, tasting fresh blood. "In Florida. Everything's in Florida."

"What stinkin' luck!" he says, gritting his teeth, his wrath showing through to his cheeks. His hard eyes on me are like hot glass. "Just you make us out four checks, see, each for a hundred, two to Jeta Marais and two to this here guy, Miro Dufos-

sat. And quick, and don't you make nary mistake."

I glare at him unbelieving, sure that he has lost his mind—if he ever had one. I take the checks and pen he has jabbed into my naked stomach.

"I can't write checks on a bank where I don't have an account," I protest, stalling for time, until Suny can get here. I tremble. Oh, Suny! For God's sake, hurry!

"That's your ass!" he mumbles.

The other one gazes stupidly at him, his hands spread wide.

"Jeta! We can't cash them! Let's get outa here. Ah got twenty outa his wallet. We can drink on that."

"We *can* cash them," Jeta insists certain with his plans. "You know that fruit out on Airline Highway, who owns that grocery store? *He'll* cash them. Let him gobble you and he'll damn well do anything you tell him, mangy old bastard." He looks then to me, poking me in the ribs with a hard finger. "Write!"

Fumbling, my vision impaired by the flowing blood, my head burning with sharp pain, I spread the checks out on the coffee table and write as he instructs me.

A moment more and they are gone. There is a thud of steps on the stairs, then one of them steps back into the room, the one who had kissed me. Like lightning, he sweeps me into his arms, buries his face in mine, his open mouth, hot, spreading over mine.

"I'm coming back and screw you yet, Star," he says, his voice drowned out by the movement of his lisping lips on mine, his sweat, his odor, rancid with the heat of his body, raids my mind. Jerking away, he lifts a filthy hand and touches my bloody mouth. His terrible eyes mellow, sadden. "I'm sorry," he whispers, his voice trembling, then he rushes out the door, closing it after him.

For a tense moment I stand in the middle of the room, trying to get my bearings, refilling my tortured mind with what has happened. It had all happened so quickly. My head bursts with pain. Taking the towel from about my waist, I go into the bathroom and wet it and press it against my eye. There is a roar of a motorcycle outside. The sound dims into the distance. I cut on the bedlamp and stretch out on the bed, my torn face buried in the wet towel.

I began to tremble, now that it is over. In all my experience with life, in and out of a thousand bars strung like cheap gaudy toys up the Gulf Coast line, I had never met people like these two. Animals! Their stench still clung to me, like an ill omen. I shudder at the possibility of them coming back. The doorbell rings. I almost jump off the bed from fright. I am too scared to move. I anticipate the physical pain if one of them comes back. I know what they will do to me. A boy had related to me once about a man raping a kid in prison. The authorities had done nothing. The kid was at the man's mercy. I had hallucinations of that fear now.

A woman raped easy . . . but a man!

"I'm coming on in," cried a voice, and to my relief, it was Suny. "Like to never got those hamburger steaks. Looked like everybody in Baton Rouge was hungry tonight. Where are you bab—Star?"

I answer that I am in the bedroom and, as he reaches the hall that separates the kitchen from the bath, he drops the food on the phone table and rushes to my side.

"What the hell's happened to you?" he cries, running to the bed and kneeling beside me. He lifts my head and examines my left eye. "My God, Star!" he cries over and over. "Who did this to you?"

"Those two who were in front of the lounge," I answer, my voice thick, clotted with bood in my throat.

"But I don't see how!"

"They followed us. I didn't get in the house good, until . . . "

He cradles my head on his thigh, his warm hands going over my face, my eye with the wet towel.

"I better call a doctor—and a policeman," he says, starting to get up, but I hold his hand.

"I don't need a doctor, Suny," and pausing, I add seriously: "And . . . and we can't tell the police."

"Can't tell the police, nonsense. They beat you up, didn't they, robbed you?"

"They did all that," I murmur, thinking back

over the incident, "but we can't say anything."

"Why?"

"Because . . . because, Suny, they think I am a queer. And . . . and if we call the police and they are caught that is what they are going to tell the police, that I tried to put the make on them, so they beat me up—a kind of self defense story. Oh, I know, I've heard of this before. And those checks I wrote too, bad checks really, for my money is not even in this state."

He sits silent for a moment, studying the whole thing through.

"We've got to do something. We can't just sit by and those two filthy punks get by with this. The truth will win out in court."

"Sometimes," I explain, remembering what Paul had told me when I first arrived in Baton Rouge, "The cops here go along with the punks, kids themselves, and most of them hate homosexuals. I don't care about being beaten. That will heal. Or the cash either. It's those checks that worry me. Do you think they will try and cash them?"

He pats me on the face affectionately.

"They would be damn fools if they did. But, they were fools to come up here in the first place, which proves their lack of sense. Too, they could be ex-cons from Angola, or on the run from some other robbery or something similar, so they probably don't give much of a damn what they do."

"So they will cash them." I let out a tired sigh. My head hurts all the more from worrying.

"Well, if they cash them, we will have to cross that bridge when they get to it—we have to think of you first."

"But . . . but my signature is on those checks. Those punks could say I wrote them out to them for a number of reasons, work, for something I bought from them or something—even for their physical services."

"Well, we know you didn't do anything like that," he soothes, being so considerate, and him a stranger, really. "I know you're not queer, Micky knows it, and anyone who is a man knows it. So you don't have anything to worry about along that line."

Micky . . . what would I tell Micky?

"It looks bad, Suny," I say, trying to sit up, but he pushes me back down on his leg. "I have to consider Micky. After all, he runs a gay bar, and I work there, and if the police find out it will go hard on him, and me too. Surely they are going to think I am a queer if I work in a queer joint."

"Did it ever occur to you, Star, that whatever you are, queer or not, the fact remains that you were beaten and robbed? Those punks, if they are caught, will have to stand trial for that, and nothing else."

"But the law does not protect homosexuals! And that is what they are going to think I am." I thought of all the gossiping queens in the lounge. "Some of them at Micky's would be ever too glad to stand up in court, just for the novelty of it, or to

have their pictures taken, and say I am a queer."

"Well, I won't."

I look up at him, see his kind face, like an angel, staring down at me.

"I wouldn't have you in court standing up for me for a million dollars," I say meaningfully. "To drag you through such filth. You're too good, too young for all that. If they cash the checks I'll go to the place where they cashed them and pay them off silently, and the punks can go where they please."

"*That* would help a lot. Then those punks would just keep beating up people and robbing them. Or, worse, come back *here* again and try the same thing, and they *will*, if they get away with this."

I went faint. What he said was true. Next time, if they got away with it, they might come back for money . . . and rape!

I am truly worried now. My mind is a quagmire, and I realize I am trouble. I wonder, as I lie here on this young kid's lap, if those punks, in their little sly scheme, realized all the obstacles they put into my life, all because of their lust for an evening's drinking money.

Yet, alone in the world, born through no desire of my own, being what I am by no fault of my own, I realize I must see it though to the end. As an old saying goes, (but not of my aunt's): what will be will be.

"I have ruined your night for you, haven't I, Suny?" I ask of him, as my mind surged in a turmoil of troubles, my eye and my mouth throb-

bing unmercifully.

"Not a chance," he answers, in that merry way he has, so full of hope, young beyond the age of callousness. "I've been wanting to know you for a long time, Star, every since I first saw you dance, and now that you're bedridden I have my chance." He lifted my head off his lap and stood up. "Do you feel like eating your steak?"

"I think so," I answer, trying to rise, forgetting that I am naked. I lay the towel over my loins.

"Don't go and spoil everything," he says, nodding toward the coverage. "I thought you looked alright the way you were."

I got up. "I'll fix the plates."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," he insists. "I'm going to do all the work. I'm going to enjoy it, so please don't try and stop me."

I let him have his way then and, going to the window, I sit on the sill and watch the rain beat on the glass, out of the night. There were several foreign ships in the harbor, their top decks illuminated from stem to stern, like fairy ships in some fairy world, remote from everything else, anchored in some shoreless ocean all their own, and I had a sudden compulsion to get away, like them, to run away from these people. In despair, I cursed myself for ever coming to this God-forsaken town, and sinking my roots in this half-world of creatures who, even at best, are entangled in one of the worst cut-throat relationships in the world. A cage, that was what they were in, a cage from which there is

no escape.

Suny brought in the tray and put it on the bed. I notice he has cut up my steak in tiny squares, so I can chew it better, and I thank him for it. "You don't have to wet-nurse me, you know."

"Let me have my fun, Star," he insists. "I realize you are independent. But, you've had a bad night and, something else which you may not like. I think I should stay with you for awhile, that is until all this is straightened out, and those filthy punks are behind bars where they belong."

"Oh, I couldn't obligate you like that," I say to him, but thinking how wonderful it would be to have someone like him around, someone with whom, in time, I might truly belong. "You have your work, and it would be putting you out."

"I have my car and I can drive down to Saint Garbriel every day and tend to things. You can come with me. I'd like that, Star. You might as well say yes, or I'll keep pestering you till you do."

He laughs, shaking his knife at me, and I consider, thinking how warm it feels to have him around, and I eye him there, across the tray from me, one foot tucked under the other, drawing the folds on his white jeans around his thighs so tightly every muscle stands out plainly, his small waist, his smooth hands, his youth ... which is so obvious. The essence of youth, actually, for he has the clean innocence to go with it like the aroma that is with the blossom.

"I would love to have you stay, Suny," I remark,

after a time of thought, "but I'm afraid I am going to bore you for awhile, until this is over, anyway. In fact, I am afraid."

I see, again, the two faces of the punks leering at me. Nightmare faces, and I feared greatly I would be seeing them in my sleep.

He looks up from his plate, knife and fork poised in mid-air. His eyes are wide and crystal clear, and filled with a certain kind of curiosity I cannot fathom nor name.

"Afraid?" he asks, "with me around?"

"Oh, it's not *that*," I explain. "It's just what they tried to do when they were here."

"What they tried to do . . . didn't they do enough?"

"I . . . I mean something else."

"May I ask . . . what else?" His mouth is open, immobile, and his eyes fixed, steady on me.

I tell him about one of them taking out his tool, his fondling me, and the other stealing the kiss, then coming back for a second, and saying what he did.

His fork dropped to his plate.

"I'll kill both the horny sons-a-bitches!"

I feel very protected, an unusual and entirely new sensation for me.

I look at him for a moment, intently, proving to myself that I see something I want to see, though I do not know why. That odd quest for fulfillment that is never quite fulfilled.

"Do you honestly care that much—what hap-

pens to me."

His pale silver eyes find mine, and I read the answer, without him having to put it into words, but he whsipers:

"Yes, Star, honestly. I do care, and a great deal more than you will ever think. I think I cared the first time I saw you dance. Oh, it's difficult to explain. But there are some people you can be around a long time and never get to know them, or care about them, or even want to care about them. But not with you, Star. I feel already that I have known you a long time, the reason, I suppose, is that I think about you a lot."

"You think about me?"

An old memory stirs, of wanting and being wanted. I thought it was dead, buried, something I could never feel again.

"Yes, when I'm out riding, alone, when I have time to think, I usually am thinking about you. Things I make up really. That is one reason why I want you to go with me to Saint Gabriel sometimes, lots of times, really. It's a heck of a world, Star, and it doesn't make sense why two people can't be together, be good friends, close, when all they have to do is be together." He looks down at his plate. "I realize you don't want to waste time with me. I bet every guy in the lounge is asking you the same thing." He looks at me then, and his eyes are torn with question, and that is sad.

"No, Suny," I say, clearing up his mind, "I'm not that popular, not really, superficially, maybe,

but underneath, more lonely than even you can imagine."

His eyes pierce me like silver darts.

"I'm lonely too, Star."

I glance away, place my hand to my eyes, stare mutely at the blind windows wet with rain. I know now, now at this moment, in this room with this handsome kid, that I do not know myself as I would like to think. There are still dark, hidden places within me, places yet unexplored, places which, over the troubled years, I have kept locked, hidden purposely. So far, that lock had not been tampered with, no doors had wanted opening. But now, in this room, in this dark, rain-washed night, things are happening to me, things that are promising, cajoling, jockeying, folding open like a book to the right page and turning my gaze upon his, I see that he is still looking at me in a way that (and I know this now, profoundly) may alter my entire life.

There is only one thing that stands in the fore: should I fight this, or yield?

And I ask myself: does every man go through stages? Is loneliness so acute a thing, so relentlessly pursuing a disease, that it can alter desire?

My aunt once said, and I hear her voice clearly now: if you are lonely enough you can learn to love anyone or anything. In my deep pit of loneliness I see that down there in the darkness.

"Do you always feel lonely?" I ask simply, trying with all my control to sound casual.

"Yes," he answers, finishing his steak, and wiping his lips with the napkin, "I might as well admit it. Lonely for something I have never been able to understand. I just don't know what I am lonely for. It frightens me sometimes. And I think, or imagine, that only certain people can keep me from being lonely. That is why I search, I guess, in my own way. I'm not a proud guy, Star, if you will notice. I will never let pride stand in the way of happiness."

"But, you're not gullible either, are you, Suny?" I say, ignoring, to a degree, the fact that he is baring his heart to me.

"I'm compulsive. If that is being gullible, then I *am* gullible. I'm not afraid to risk my heart if something good and wonderful can come out of it. I think man, basically—regardless who he loves—is a better man and is better off by merely loving."

"Those are dangerous sideroads," I advise him, taking my own past into account. "Love can be *miserable* as well as wonderful."

"Not with the right person."

His eyes burn into mine. I can feel their intense heat from across the bed. They beckon on to paradise.

So I say stubbornly, kicking the props out of his logic.

"But . . . finding that person."

"Oh, Star," he says softly, his voice deep with passion, lifting the tray and standing over me. "*I'm* willing to give it a try. If I don't, I'll be even unhappier . . . even more lonely. I—I just want to

belong . . . and truly *know* I belong."

I cannot answer. Youth has trapped me in my own fugitive resistance. I am being given all that I have ever, in my fright, denied. Suny was bringing the battle of my life into the enemy's own territory.

Placing a hand under my chin, he lifts my face to his.

"Was it miserable eating, with your hurt face?"

"Not too much,," I answer dryly, thinking how sad life can be, even with happiness in your hand. "But it will be sore tomorrow."

He rushes into the bathroom and, returning, brings a bottle of something he has found in the medicine chest, dabbing it on my eye and lips.

"Just call me, Dr. Kildare," he jokes, running his fingers through my hair. He looks at me for a moment, a long thoughtful look. "If only I hadn't gone after those hamburger steaks."

"You've lost a night, haven't you, Suny?"

"No. I gained . . . gained a new life, a better life."

He keeps blocking my path of thought, my purposefully diverting thoughts, I might add truthfully.

"Don't bank *too* much on me, Suny," I advise him, turning my head away. "I have lost all my good qualities; lost them long ago. There isn't much left."

"Let me be the judge of that." He turns back the spread, and motions for me to climb under. I obey him thankfully. "Time you were getting your

beauty sleep."

He begans to undress, and I lie in the shadows of the bedlamp and watch him, self-indulgently. He pulls off everything but his shorts, which gleam in the half-light—which adds a dark gloss to his sun tanned complexion. He seems smaller somehow, his narrow waist, his flat stomach, his thick, curvy legs ... more shapely, far, even than Micky's . . . his rounded chestplates and heavy, broad biceps, all gathering harmoniously, yet separated as muscle overlaps muscle. He comes around the bed, sits down and leans over me, and I feel the strong pulsing of his youth, his blithe strength, which now I so badly need. His young warmth, so clean, as if he has been dipped in molten honey, his dark skin aglow, I am taken out of my senses.

Reaching across my body, flipping out the bedlamp, he draws me close and kisses me full upon the mouth.

"I look terrible, I know," is all I can think to say. For I cannot fight this beautiful boy, who, for some reason of his own, wants me as no one else can ever have me. Not successfully.

"You look wonderful to me, Star," he whispers, burying his face in the hollow of my shoulder. "But I know you feel bad, your face all torn and sore, so I will wait for the other."

That next morning we awaken early, grab a quick cup of coffee, and, with my face swollen and purple, we drive down to Saint Gabriel. I had told him during the night that I did not want to be seen

around town any more than necessary, not until this mess was cleared up . . .

I remain with him a week, until my face lost the swelling and, if it weren't for worrying about the bad checks, I'd have had the most wonderful time in years.

He brought me back with a tide of resolutions for our future, and when we arrived at my apartment Micky and Lolly were waiting for us.

"Where in the hell have you been?" he asked sharply, examining my face. "A detective has been looking for you. You're wanted on a bad check charge."

CHAPTER FIVE

Suny and Micky went with me to the police and I explained everything. They had the two punks in jail, with no one to go their bail, and who had said, of all things, that I had paid them by check for sexual pleasures. I was then turned over to an attorney, employed by the state, who would act in my defense. He studied my face, the bruises, heard my story, questioned me repeatedly, then let me go. Yes . . . there would be a trial.

It was set for the middle of December.

In the meantime, while sweating it out (for I am truly frightened now) I continued to dance at the Blue Mirror Lounge. But I did not linger around the bar after work. The mocking faces of the queens, that I-told-you-so expression on their painted faces, etched on my mind a greater fear for, basically, they were publicity seekers, exhibitionists, doing anything that would draw attention to themselves, and I nearly panicked toward the time when I would appear in court . . . in the face of this malicious mob . . . for surely they would be present to gloat, to see my rise or fall, while I tried to defend myself not only from a bad check charge—but also from homosexuality.

So every night after I danced, which now (at times) was applauded by boos and cat-calls, Suny was there to meet me, and we usually went straight to my apartment, or up to Third Avenue to a little

bar called The Unicorn, a straight bar frequented by the college set. There we sat and drank beer, talked and listened to the music.

It was a plush bar, to a degree, its decor dominated by cherry red, with bright, red, leather-covered tables and chairs. One entire wall was a mirror, and the wall facing it stood out with a lovely mural, depicting a scene with animals from ancient mythology: unicorns, centaurs, etc.

The bar was noted for its many bar-girls who waited on the patrons, usually very young and very pretty and very shapely. They wore matching capris, matching blouses, clear plastic high heeled pumps, opera pumps, really, and scarlet plumes in their hair. It was part of their costume that they all wore white wigs, a striking contrast with the red plumes and rich red background of the lounge.

I missed the good times at the Blue Mirror Lounge, the parade of queens, though I wondered how I *could* come to miss such a group, a now completely malicious group to me. Frustrated naturally; all mixed up with their "ailments," their exile from a society which did not want them, and never would, possibly; torn between the desire to be *both* man and woman, the authoritative qualities of the male dictating to them, yet confused by the cattiness of the female which was in the perplexity of their natures; they were quick to spring at the least provocation, quick to rebel among their own kind, anxious to put each other down. Naturally envious and jealous of one another, basically more

female than male, to them, every *other* queen is a natural enemy, and every butch is a potential lover.

It did not surprise me when they instinctively turned against me. I think they suspected, even from the first, that I was not of their kind, for my aloofness did little to establish their wholehearted trust in me, and, now ... now that I was in this frightful predicament, I regretted not being more friendly with them, not intimately, but going to their after-closing-time parties, their little get-togethers, their gossip sessions, usually held in their homes or in their apartments.

I was cut off from them now in a way I did not relish, exiled by the exiles and I already felt their stoning.

I still had Suny, thank God for him. Though he is still waiting. For what ... I am not fully certain. He is a strange male, but unique among his species. I have never met anyone like him. He is happy ... his eyes tell me that when he looks at me ... bends over backwards to do anything he can for me (for which I am more than grateful), and, like me, bides his time until this horrible trial is over with and done with.

Micky has become another affair. His suspicions that there is something sexual going on between me and Suny is obvious ... with his every gesture, his every action, his every look; though to date he has said nothing. But I feel that, beneath his exterior, lies that "I-want-to-talk-to-you ..." attitude, so I avoid him as much as I can. He, I am certain too, is

a little nervous and concerned for the outcome, not for my sake only, but for the Lounge. He knows the Gay world by heart, through and through, and realizes how it could effect his business. Sad that events have made a gap between us, and everyone —actually—who is a patron of his bar. For my trial is the greatest topic of their conversations these days, and though many, surprisingly, sympathize, there are many who are more than anxious to see the scandal and peril which attends it.

"Just don't let it ruin your Christmas," Mickey said to me one night, when he insisted that Suny and I have a beer with him after my dance.

"It won't," I answered, though, momentarily I saw everything ruined for my future in this town, a place I was growing to like, a place where my dancing seemed successful, a place where I had started to take roots. Now, however, only the thin, golden thread of Suny's devotion held me back from an escape into the night, taking myself far from this town, these jeering, scandal-minded people, these peircing eyes, this clawing, clamorous fairy world.

Micky looked at me from across the bar and his expression was deeply serious.

"Star, I want you to do something for me, for the lounge, and for yourself," he said quietly so that the queens alongside of us could not overhear.

"Anything I can," I answered, promising prodigies.

"The heat's on, as both you and Suny know.

And you know who's leading it . . . Corinthian. He's gathering his forces, mainly to put you both down. He hates your guts, Star, because he's jealous of you, and envious of your popularity in town, your dancing, and everything else about you." He dropped his eyes. "And he thinks you've taken his boy away from him . . . which I guess you have."

Suny and I looked at one another.

"He's having a grand session at his place tonight after I close. I want you and your boy to go.

So . . . we went.

As Corinthian had once told me, he lived in a mansion. Old, truly ante-bellum, with tall faintly luminous columns glowing through a net-work of live oaks shrouded with grey moss, it is truly beautiful, steeped in old charm and something of romance. This we see as Suny and I roll up the long curving drive, the Mustang gliding under whiskers of moss, through shadowy avenues and alcoves to the house itself.

It is ablaze with lights as we pull up in front, with every tall window aglow, and already there is a babble of voices, of yells, of falsetto utterances pouring from the long halls, the living room and library, as we get out.

The lawn is crowded with cars, bumper to bumper, every make and description, every color and hue, mostly the more gaudy ones, from Volkswagens to a Rolls Royce between a Honda and a motorcycle; they're all here—old and new, and the latest, more stylized ones; even a couple of saddle

horses at the side of the house cowering from the cold wind driving in from the north—cowpoke hustler, and cowboy queens!

"Looks like every fruit in Baton Rouge is here tonight," Suny remarks, as we stand for a moment surveying the crowd. "Kinda hate to go in, with that Corinthian gloating. It's a lion's den, Star, and you're the victim, I'm afraid."

Though his quiet voice is warm, considerate, I shudder at his words. My defenses are down, and I try to summon every ounce of my courage for this ordeal.

"I wouldn't give a damn," I say to him, "if it wasn't for this trial and the possible consequence. Thank God you are with me."

"I will always be with you, Star," he says, reassuring me. "And Micky, too, is on our side, you know that."

I nod, then turn and look once more at how nicely he is dressed. We had both changed—purposely—to look our finest in front of all these clawing, screaming cats. Seeing him sitting beside me, smelling freshly of cologne, his shiny hair brushed back in thick curls, his black suit, black topper, gloves, bringing out the bluish-whiteness of his ruffled dress shirt, made him all the more the prince, the shining knight to me, and I say as much:

"They'll be pea-green with envy, seeing me with you."

"And me with you," he smiles.

We get out, finally, and go up the steps where a few queens stand smoking, their eyebrows going up as we pass. Bitches!

We are greeted by a tiny Japanese house boy, sleek as satin, his long hair, black as a raven's wing, reflecting the enormous lights of the hallway chandelier, his black suit, immaculate, but flat, without shine nor luster, so recently pressed I imagine I get the warm scent of the iron.

He escorts us into the living room, where we both poise, breathless, on the threshold. The room, vast, high ceilinged, is crowded with people, both men and women, handsome masculine men, masculine homosexuals with beautiful women who may adore, perhaps, but can never really love one another, less masculine men with Lesbian partners, and the feminine, feminine ones, alone, or with another feminine partner, most of them standing, huddled in select groups, their hands sporting sparkling drinks, smoke coiling, a haze of multicolor, kaleidoscopic in my vision, actually, because they all suddenly turn in our direction, their fish eyes multiplying as one's attention, then another is drawn to Suny and me.

"Gods! nightmare!" whispers Suny. "Sodom unveiled! If I've ever seen it. A field day for the vice squad!"

They are all here, I see as my eyes scan this sparkling room, dazzled by the color, the sumptousness of it, the aristocratic grandeur, as one must be dazzled on entering, unexpectedly, the court of a

king. But as my trained eyes separate the individual form from the mass, I see it is not all glory and grandeur. As all homosexual gatherings, the rich and poor alike mingle intimately ... the only society of its kind in the world.

At no time, in any land, are the motley and the distinguished so closely brought together, such a wide breech closed by one mutual cause ... youth and beauty, for no forms of society, no goal of any club, creed, cult, or order has placed such a premium on good looks and youth, the essential drawing cards.

Millionaires, together with roadhouse operators, clerks, cooks, bus boys, valets, garage mechanics, maintenance workers, cowboys, ex-convicts, whores, male hustlers, tramps, and even vagrants, rub elbows at such affairs and are as essential and as well thought of and as respected as the nobility, if ... they are both young and handsome.

The straights never had it so good!

In the straight society, the normals, a vast culling exists, and creates such a notable caste allowance that the lower working class never harbors the illusion of "belonging" in the atmosphere of the country clubs, the social gatherings, the glamour circles of those secure, vastly wealthier and prestigious. The three distinct levels of society of the straights is so clearly marked, so firmly-established, so long-practiced, those on the lower levels, along the borders of this world, are hopeless, however, ambitious, to climb to where their financial

status makes it an impossibility for them to "belong."

Here, it is vastly different.

As I stand in this huge, brilliant room, my trained eyes picking out one, then another; whetting my courage for the instant I am to move in among them, I can detect the lowest and the highest: wealthy men and women, dressed to their teeth, who have dropped in for a drink and conversation after a meeting at their own club, or social affair. These, above the working class, vain, usually handsome, both male and female; healthy with that certain brand of vitality that goes with steady wealth. Young men of the working class, usually the office type, slightly feminine, good jobs, good pay, who find it necessary in their strict employment rules—to be on their constant guard, but can slip away to such hide-a-way places as this inconspicious mansion. The out-door working group, bronzed, hard of muscle, who usually drink too much, for they are conscious of their expected masculinity in the presence of their employees and are acutely aware and sensitive about their "conditions." The even lower-class working group, manual labor to the extreme, outside in all weather, low-salaried, never obviously feminine, hopeful of meeting someone of influence; those who can work only at feminine trades, elaborately feminine, even to the degree of girlishness: hair stylists, clerks in dress shops, cooks, nurses, school teachers, chauffeurs; and those so obviously feminine they don't give a

damn, falsely created by nature, they flaunt their daring charades at the public, female impersonators, drag queens (kept up by their sugar daddies, or keeping some stud). The male hustlers, pretty boys, college kids out for a lark, high school beauty boys who lie about their age, punks, vagrants, boys who have served time and cannot quite adjust to straight living, boys who have nice builds, good-looking, but not girlish, but who are fascinated by being admired, boys who earnestly do not know what they want, and find such places good pickings, and last, the curious studs, obviously he-men, but male feminines unconsciously, who will take it in the rear as a matter of course, do not consider it queer, go with girls, and are constantly at war with their masculinity.

They are all here, the wealthy, the worker, the faggot, the girl-boys, the boy-girls, the female boys, the boy females, girls dressed like men, men dressed like women, addicts, ex-cons, midgets, giants, the fat, the bald, the old, the very, very young.

It is the society of exiles. The misfits. The angry young men. The social climbers. The down-and-out-sex-hungry maniacs. The beauties seeking adoration. The looters. The ridiculers. The ridiculous.

One gaudy, cheap, brilliant, sequined embryo.

A circus!

Through the maze of faces, thankfully, I fail to see my counterpart. This gives me needed courage.

Or, if I see, my pride denounces it to my vigilant mind.

Micky comes quickly to greet us, he, too, immaculate in a dark suit, the first time I have seen him dressed ... pale pink ruffled dress shirt, patent leather slippers with tiny black bows. He leans forward and says to us both, very softly.

"They're going to nail your sails to the mast, but I'm with you."

I grip his hand. And, like all times when I am cornered, I lift my head disdainfully, and with Suny on one side and Micky on the other, enter the room.

In front of a massive hearth, made of white marble on which a golden clock ticks away on the polished mantle, a fire warmly ablaze, sits Corinthian in a huge black Roman field chair, the sort you see in Biblical movies. He is dressed in a wine silk dinner jacket, with quilted diamond shapes along the front, black velvet lapels and cuffs. Dark shiny pants fit down his legs, as tight as the skin, to soft, black socks, down to rich evening pumps, decorated with tassels. Poised, his shiny head rigid, a long cigarette holder held like a baton, or swagger stick, he looks at us, gleaming, triumphant. Suddenly, this is his hour.

He stands up, takes a puff of his lavender cigarette, and makes a slight bow.

"What a delightful, incredulous surprise. Welcome to *Twilit Athens*."

Suny and I return his greeting, under the icy

glare of everyone in the room. A screaming faggot giggles.

"Welcome to Baton Rouge's society of the homos. This is their headquarters, and I am their Dauphine. For so small a city my subjects are many. Faithful, I might add," he darts a cold glance toward Suny, "To their very privates." He gives a smug laugh. "I rule sternly, but with a lover's hand, so you see, gentlemen, crimes are few; punishment is rare."

I glance about me to catch a few reactions.

"Do you lead by the chance of your inheritance, or by popular vote?" I ask him pleasantly, trying to sound warm and cold at the same time.

His eyes dull strangely. They go from me to Suny then back to me. That frozen smile cuts again across his face, like a knife slice through a clay head, made by some disappointed sculptor.

"Both, you might say," he answers coyly. "My subjects adore me—my wine, my food, my mansion, my money." He waves a hand over his audience. "*Nothing* buys faith so well as money and influence." He leans forward slightly, and I see he has been drinking heavily, yet keeps his faculties marvelously . . . from a long habit of daily drinking and partying, I suspect.

The Japanese boy brings a tray with crystal glasses of what, to me, look like martinis.

He passes them to us, then to Corinthian, who takes one and raises it to his lips. He sips, then downs the drink, rudely. He blinks. He knows he

has made an error. His dark, marble eyes bulge, and, running his hand past my lapel, he glances at the label of my suit. Another error.

"Ah, Botany," he exclaims. "Good taste, Star." He eyes Suny, who remains silent, then back to me. "Seems you could carry your good taste in clothes to that in men. There you fail miserably."

I look at Suny, who has a flushed face, then to Corinthian.

"Suny, I'm sure you're aware, is the cream of the crop. The absolute end," I add, taking up for this kid who, lately, has become essential to me.

Suny squirms, keeps his silence, but I can tell he is seething inwardly. His poise is breath-takingly incredible.

"I wasn't referring to your golden boy," Corinthian says with a silken tongue, the words going over his tongue like oil.

"I'm very fond of Suny," I remark, carrying my defense a step further. "And I hate to see him hurt."

"That is obvious," Corinthian says, raising a long thin finger, dictatorially. "But I repeat, I am not referring to your cowboy playmate, for whom, I'm certain the price runs high."

"It's nice I have the price." I say this with subtle, malignant viciousness, tongue in cheek.

It strikes home. There are a few giggles which rise, through a continuous hum of voices. The crowd moves nervously, as if uninterested, but invariably moves inward. There is a constant swishing

of queens cutting wide arcs with their pacing, giddily going from one queen to another, whispering, their heads together in an empathy all their own. Some, who might be on my side, try to engage in their own conversations. Yet, obviously, all ears are cocked like foxes, alert for the hounds.

"I was referring, *Star*," and he says Star with emphasis, "to your two rough trade paramours ... you know the ones with which you are presently engaged in civil trouble." He clicks his teeth. "Or ... should I say ... moral trouble."

"There was nothing like that with us," I come back readily. "It was robbery and nothing else. Those kids were nothing but punks!"

"Well, there are some among us who *adore* rough punks," he says hatefully, gauging his audience, trying to put me down. "In fact, the rougher, the dirtier, the better ... yes, girls?"

There is a sudden clamor of shrieks, high pitched screams!

One faggot cries burlesque like:

"Animal! man, animal!" and he lets out a shrill, "GGGRRRrrrrrrr!"

"Surely you don't think there was ..."

"Surely you don't think," he interrupts, annoyed, his dark eyes snapping, yet he smiles, "that all of these girls here think you *didn't* have an affair with these two young innocents before you paid them off ... and with bad checks!" He laughs then, a malicious, sadistic laugh, turning to catch the gleeful, spiteful faces which so maddeningly fill

this brilliant room.

Tiny pricks, like needles, shoot up my spine, and I fight to keep control of my anger, which is mounting by the minute. Suny and Micky too, who stand close, glare with snapping eyes at the girlish queens who have now automatically become a ferocious mob, Cats!

"Think what you will, Corinthian," I murmur politely, calmly. "But my friends, here and I, will handle the situation."

Linking Suny with my ultimatum stirs him viciously, added to the drink, which is making him inebriated.

"Oh, yes, Star, you will handle it!" he half-shouts, flinging up an arm. "You're going to ruin us all with your choice of suitors! The very scum of the streets. You're going to get up in court, like a lot of these timid queens have done in the past, say quietly to the court that you do not want to press charges, that you will pay off the checks, all because you are afraid they will bring out the bit about your being a queer and having a sexual affair with them. Then, there will be an investigation. The vice squad will come up from New Orleans. They will question every last one of us, give half of us sentences, or fines, close Micky's Blue Mirror Lounge, and all the punks will *still* go free, to do the same thing again and again, and to encourage the others. Why didn't you just get in touch with those big-tooled punks of yours, pay off the checks, and leave the police out of it?"

"What?" I shout, furious that he regards me as such a feeble mentality. "Do you think I'm nuts? I have no intention of paying off any checks."

He shrugs.

"You don't have the money, Star? I'll pay them for you."

The room rocks with laughter, as he reaches in his coat, takes out a pen and checkbook.

"I have the money," I say hotly. "It's the principle of the thing which keeps me from paying."

"The principle! Oh Lord!"

"Listen you!" I shout, my nerves now keyed to the ferocity of the thing, the humiliation of Micky and Suny who have kept quiet, mainly for my sake, spurring me to additional wrath. "All you faggots!" I emphasize that word. "Think what you will. But I am going to see this through. I am going to court. I am going to answer every question the attorneys ask me, and truthfully. I am going to get on the stand and tell the court why the homosexual in this town does not stand a chance, how he is victimized, harrassed, beaten, robbed by these punks, as I was. I am going to tell why the cops will not defend the homosexual, why the homosexual, when he is rolled and robbed and beaten, is *afraid* to inform the police, is afraid to come forward and speak his mind, to tell the truth. What I am going to say in court is going to help every one of you, not harm you. The trouble is, that when you *are* molested, you are reluctant about going to the police. But not me. I am not going to stand by and let two filthy

punks get away wtih stealing my money, and my good name. I am not homosexual, those two punks think I am, and are using that against me. So, unlike you, I stand a chance of winning my case, at the same time striking a blow for you, who I consider my friends . . . if you still want me as a friend."

There is a sudden silence. Hushed. You can hear a pin drop.

Corinthian sways, uneven on his feet. Then, with a last dignity he stiffens.

"A noble speech, Mr. Star," he mutters, his gaze hungrily, sadly on Suny, then reluctantly, jealously on me, "but you don't have the courage. There's two of them against you, and they are going to stick by their story. I know punks. They operate like Siamese twins. They will say you're queer, and if you say you're not, then its two against one. You'll end up on a bad check charge. They'll end up scot-free, and every queen in town will be under investigation for a month."

I think for a moment. My searching eyes find Suny's, then Micky's, and in them I see something of faith, of courage, something like a tonic which galvanizes me into action.

"I will say in court that I *am* a homosexual then."

Then, something electric snaps through the air.

As if every queen in the place, every homosexual, understanding in that one simultaneous instant the true meaning, the power behind my words, rushes

forward in a wild, jubilant ovation. Faces stare up at me, lit now with a joy I've never encountered in the faces before, Paul, and Wanda, and Bambi, and Cook, and Chuck, and Butch, even little Tinker Bell, tugging on my pants leg and crying in that little girl's voice of his, and oh, so many more, hugging me, blowing me a kiss, flinging their faith to me in consanguineous felicity and suddenly, I am rich with friends!

One queen, in a deeply Southern drawl, laments: . . "You-all lak Jesus Christ, come to save us, honey!"

Another one.

"Let the good times roll!"

A faggot comes on:

"Whee! if the vice squad could see us *now*!"

And another.

"Ah can walk down Third Street now shaking my money-makin' ass, free as a bird."

Still another:

"When dis all ovah, Ah'm goin' shoppin' in high Drag!"

A tiny queen cast arms skyward, saint like.

"Lawd! Ouah savior's a-coming . . . he's a-coming, amen!"

"Cast out Satan! Them money-grabbin' punks! Sinners! Sinners! Let the good times roll!"

"Star! Our star of Bethlehem!"

Drinks, in sparkling glasses, grow from stalk-like arms thrust upward. I am offered every kind of drink imaginable.

Suny hugs me to him, closely, warmly, under Micky's watchful eyes. "God! I love you, Star. God I do!" His grip is like steel, but yet, soft as fur. "You sure surprised the hell outa *me*. Why didn't you tell *me* you were going to get up and say that?"

I couldn't answer for the noise.

Corinthian sinks in his great Roman chair. His cigarette holder, streaming smoke, falls to the floor. A rabbit-eyed punk with pinkish hair leans and picks it up and lovingly puts it back into his mouth. The same, I imagine, as he would put in his tool.

The mansion becomes a mad-house. Everyone exchanges drinks. They dance around Corinthian, whose long legs are extended, twist past the blazing fire in the hearth, stick out their buttocks to warm them lovingly, let out screaming laughs, then past the long lowboy heaped with food glistening under tall white tapers, boiled hams, fried chicken, sauces, dips, cakes, wreathed with holly. Lights are dimmed, and Suny and I locate a secluded love seat in the corner of the room. We wedge our way through the mob, over the fine carpet strewn with whiskey glasses, scraps of greasy food, tissue paper, beer cans, and sit down wearily. He puts his arm around me, as if I were a girl, and looks at me longingly.

"I don't deserve you," he whispers. "Honestly, I don't. You're too good for me, too dear and fine."

"But don't go to anybody else," I whisper, my head beginning to reel. I am feeling my drinks and, suddenly, this massive room, this mansion dripping

with moss, becomes my hoped-for world. I am at that stage through a course of mixing my drinks, that I am on the verge of getting drunk, and there is a clear, clean clarity, a startling reality that rides on the drunkness, before plunging into the morose, dim nightmare of inebriation itself. In other words I am high, elevated on the pedestal, the eminence to which I have been lifted up, my old pains and doubts ripped away over my turn at court, the trial, the fear of the outcome, and the sudden surprising compromise of these people, the extremity of their passions, cold, hostile one moment, now strangely warm, loving, understanding.

The world for me is moving steadily in one continuous stream, every person, every gaudy form swaying harmoniously, like dancers under the spell of one rhythm, like migrating birds, like children, wild children on a merry-go-round.

Care and longing have taken separate wings, flown to some far off world where I cannot, momentarily, follow, and somehow I am thankful—glad. Suny—yes, Suny is beside me, saying things he's never said before and, keyed to this maddening, crazy world, I hear his words, his soft warm voice cajoling, capturing and conquering me.

Micky, who is now at the wobbling stage, his legs wide apart, like a sailor on a plunging ship, looms before me, a whiskey bottle in one hand, a half-filled glass in the other, the contents spilling over sloppily. He bends near us, grabs one of the arm rests for support. His face is pale, deathly pale,

like melting wax, his eyes beady, shot with tiny sparks, and his hair is a ruffled mass. Sweat runs down his face, from the fire in the huge hearth, from too much liquor, and like some figure out of a crazy carnival, he stares me down.

"There's something I wanta know too, Star," he leers, his teeth showing along one side of his mouth. "I want to know ... just what did happen that night?"

I glare up at him.

"You too, Brutus?"

He flinches. His body rocks back and forth. I had never seen him drunk. He has lost none of his good looks, and there is something dashing about him, a recklessness any woman would have loved to see, and would have swooned over. Yet, here he was, gutted with rage, because of a harbored assumption of some sexual relationship he suspected me of, and demanding to know the answer.

"Yeah, I been wanting to know for a long time, Star," he says drunkenly, his tongue thick, the smell of liquor on his breath, his eyes turbulent, filled with a fire that boils up from his soul. "Just what happened that night with them two hairy punks and this cute kid here of yours?" He pokes a thumb in Suny's direction. "Tell me, Star, I gotta know!"

"Nothing, Micky," Suny cries, taking up the defense.

He sways forward, catches his balance.

"You stay outta this, purty boy," he warns,

giving Suny a hateful eye. "I'm talking to your lover here. What happened, Star—STAR—*STAR*!" He gets louder and louder. He is angry now, and the essence of that anger darts out from him like daggers.

"Nothing!" I shout, my eyes peering at his through the uncertain light. "Nothing! Besides, it's none of *your* business!"

"It isn't huh?" he says, almost with a moan, and life leaves his body. Suddenly I feel sorry for him.

"I'm not trying to be hateful, Micky," I apologize, sensing now what I had sensed long ago about him. "But nothing happened, *you* know that."

He looks like a small scolded child.

"I know . . . nothing happened." He hangs his head for a moment then, lifting it again, looks at me longingly.

"Star . . . Star, let's say—lets say good bye to this pretty little boy, huh? We'll go somewhere, just the two of us, take a ride, out in the country, I know a place, get away from these God-damned faggots, with their groping hands, always feeling me up, huh, what you say? I've waited a long time, Star, longer than anybody, longer than this kid here . . . why do you make me wait, huh?"

He turns up the bottle, tries to take a drink, pouring it out at each corner of his lips, spilling on the carpet.

He lays a hand on my knee. "Come on, baby, let's go."

Suny knocks his hand away.

"Listen here, Micky," he warns calmly, "I don't want us to fight. We're friends, but lay off Star. You hear me, lay off Star."

"Who you shoving?" Micky cries gruffly, trying to straighten up. He looms forward again, drops his glass.

Let's go," Suny says to me, gripping my arm. "I don't want to make a scene. There's been enough tonight."

We rise quickly, brush past Micky, who paws after me, and cross the living room and into the darkness of the hall. There, shadows loom up frighteningly, as the lights on a car out front, wheeling to go out, throw fantastic patterns along the mural-papered walls. A young queen, with his back to the wall, is groping a stud whose jeans are lowered to his knees, his white thighs gleaming faintly in the scattering light momentarily, but long enough to reveal a glimpse of his penis erect, swallowed up in a patch of black hair, and the queen's anxiously manipulating fingers.

"How would you like to be rammed with *that*?" the stud is saying, and is answered by the gasping queen with: "You're too *much*, daddy-O!"

Hurriedly, ignoring the sex-involved couple, we wobble down the hall, Suny's hand clutching mine, past two boy-queens and a tall Negro, obviously appearing later on the scene, to the front door. But there Micky catches us.

We are on the front gallery now, somehow, my head spinning. The tall columns sway, like tree

trunks on the summit of a mountain, ice drenched, ghostly—frightful, nightmare shapes among heavy-limbed trees. And the tops of the cars are like white stones in the moonlight, beset with elves, chattering, giggling sounds coming from them. Suny's arm goes around me, to steady me, and the face of Micky, like something out of a horror movie, is next to mine, blazing with white light, eyes piercing, hot eyes, but like clear glass.

"Star! Star!" he is mumbling, his hands groping for my shoulders. I feel a strong tug, as Suny jerks him away, and there is the sound of a body lunging against the outer wall.

Suny, in a cajoling, calm voice, is pleading: "Micky, go inside. Leave us alone. Please! I don't want any trouble."

The face is suddenly back, the arms, tearing, gripping me, pulling me to him. Lips close over mine, lips trembling with sobs, and through those sobs drunken murmurings: "Star, I love you, Star. I love you . . . let me love you . . . please!"

Suny's strong arms rip us apart. There is a struggle on the gallery. Bodies, dark bodies locked in a dark embrace, pivot and sway. There is the sound of a fist, a dull thud.

Suny is grabbing me now and, like some crazy carnival show, hideous, sprinkled with just enough light to make it all the more hideous, we are running down the steps, to the car. There is a snarl of the motor, the squeaking of tires the abrupt halt of brakes as the car is spun around, the front lights

circling with long fantastic beams, the shrouds of moss, or ghosts, and there coming up behind us, that face again, sobbing, drunken, beautiful somehow in my mind, in its love madness, its sex craving ... Micky!

We lunge for the main road, as if the car is on springs, and turning in my seat, I see Micky sprawl in the gravel drive behind us. Hear his sobs, long after we are gone.

"He's all right," I hear Suny say who is sitting beside me, his broad shoulders looming up over the steering wheel. "I didn't hit him hard."

Suddenly, as if snatched from somewhere else in time, I am lying on the bed in my own apartment. And hands—soft, warm hands are taking off my clothes. And there is a voice somewhere coming out of the night, soothing, whispering, promising.

I am nude now, free from all the hateful bonds of the world, and nightmare is ending—ending in someone's arms. Hot lips brush mine. Strong warm arms, hard with muscle, coil about me, lifting my body, playing along my chest, my ribs, my groin. And the lips, again, needled with sharp pricks of hair missed by the razor's edge, cover my nipples, slide down in a tingling stream to my groin, my navel, up under my arms, to my lips, my wounded eye, my lips again. And I feel, suddenly, a weight on my body, thick hairy thighs nudging my thighs apart, swallowing me, and darkness covers my world.

And out of all this soothing, tantalizing mad-

ness someone is saying, whispering, pleading, demanding, as I surrender:

"I'm going to take you tonight, baby. Understand? I love you. I'm going to take you tonight."

CHAPTER SIX

On the day of the trial, though in dead winter, the sun shone warmly, and a slight breeze, moving from the southwest, finished shaking the last of the leaves from the huge umbrella oaks which completely surrounded the courthouse.

I had considered wearing something conservative, my gray flannel, with a shoe string tie, or my Italian walking coat in a beefy diagonal-weave and tan slacks, lending me the appearance of ruggedness and boyishness. But at the last minute I changed my mind. If I was to appear as a homosexual, then I would have to look, with some essence, the part. Not so much conspicuously homosexual, nevertheless the hinted obviousness of the homosexual.

So I wear my high heeled boots, my black dancing costume, without my hat and cape, and around my eyes I paint drastic dark outlines, Egyptian style, not only to accent them, but to give them something of the theatrical, though I never wore makeup of any kind when I danced.

As the interior of a church always looks sacred, so does the inside of a courthouse look authoritarian, and the courthouse in Baton Rouge is no exception. A courthouse can be both the most assuring and the most frightening place in the world.

The pale mint green walls, the huge portraits in gilt frames staring disdainfully down from their

heights, the little polished wooden fence which separates the spectators from the attorneys, the jury box, and the judge, the State and United States flags rising behind the bench, all are impressions branded in my mind ... lasting impressions ... as are the hundreds of faggot faces in the audience, frozen, keyed to my every word, the firm-faced jury with its doubtful expressions, the ring of young attorneys, novices really who handle such unimportant cases, and the Judge himself, a majestic old eagle, seeing everything, hearing everything, missing nothing.

And last, but by no means least, the faces of the two punks whom I had not seen since that nightmare in which they robbed and victimized me ... still more nightmarish than ever ... as they will remain in my mind the balance of my life.

After ten long hours of cross-examination, calling forth witnesses, calling me back again and again, after each witness, my every word pinned to the two punks who sat directly down in front of me (an odd place for a defendent to sit), my every move and gesture tagged by the jury, their smiles at times bordered on the ridiculous (one winked at me), the maddening repetition of the punks' defense lawyer, I was asked to leave the courtroom, under a curtain of silence, and out into the hall where the witnesses had to wait until being called.

Though I had not been allowed permission to speak with any of the witnesses until the trial was over, I breathed my first sigh of relief when I heard

over the speaker system that the jury had retired to decide the case, and that the trial, so far as the witnesses were concerned, was over.

Wiping sweat from my brow, I look up to see Lolly standing there to greet me. She is dressed in classical black and pink, with a wide brimmed hat which all but covers one sparkling eye, and her ready smile melts my heart.

"You were wonderful, Star," she whispered, pulling a fur piece up around her shoulders, freeing one hand which grips mine warmly. "I want to thank you for what you have done for the—for those people here in town. They have needed that boost for a long time now. Something for them to go on in the future."

I look at her, puzzled, remembering our first conversation, and her resentment for the "gays."

Her expression automatically resolves to seriousness, and there is a troubled sadness about her eyes as she looks up at me from beneath the dark brim of her hat.

"I—my sister is like that," she stammers. Then shrugs her shoulders. "I never mention it to anyone here, because all my folks are from New Orleans, and it's hardly seemed worth while to bring up the subject . . . until now."

I look at her intently, studying her, hopeful of seeing something which will correspond to my feelings.

"You have not held it against her?" I ask—but declare at the same time. A policeman comes down

the hall, who nods to her in greeting. She smiles back. Then she is immediately serious again.

"Not really. Oh, Mother and I always tried to talk to her about it, which made things worse, really. It made her feel so bad, so aware of herself, I think, self-conscious, you know. She got worse, felt Mother and I didn't love her, which we did, naturally. She couldn't bear living with us, us knowing, you see, so she finally left, moved to California."

She tries to smile then, and there is a faint twinkle in her eyes.

I think of my kid brother then, see his thin, drawn face out of my past, his covey of tears, the desperation, the unhappiness that went after. I swallow hard. No . . . I won't think of him now. Yet, persistently came my own voice talking to myself: I've struck a blow for him today.

"We were so close when we were kids," she continues, ignoring my silence, my staring into the distance, and her voice parallels mine and my brother's life together. "We still are close, I suppose. I didn't want her to go away, to isolate herself from the family, but she did. That is what is so hard for these people, Star. They don't think we love them. But today—today, seated in there in that courtroom, listening to you on the stand, pretending you were . . . like that . . . in front of all those men, I said to myself: "that takes courage." And when I realized you were defending people like that, not just those here in Baton Rouge, but all over the world so to speak, I realized you were

defending my sister too, and you know, Star, I felt good all over." She sighs then, pats my hand, and goes on. "I want my sister back—with me. I'm going to write her tonight, ask her to come back, tell her about you, what you have done. Don't you think I should?"

I nod.

"Definitely I do, Lolly," I say. "She is only people like us, and may need us more than we need her."

"No, I need *her*," she assures, and she blinks her eyes.

The door to the courtroom opens and out comes Micky. He has a sheepish look at first seeing me, but then his face blossoms into a broad grin, and he comes directly to where Lolly and I are standing near a circular window with the courtyard grounds below us.

"Glad this ordeal is over with?" Lolly asks of him, her face profiled against the window panes.

"Whew!" he says, "am I? One more hour of that and I would have agreed with those two renegades. Man, were they rough-looking."

"I cannot understand why you were not frightened to death, Star," Lolly whispers, turning back to me. "Sure glad I was in New Orleans that week."

"We have to stand what we have to stand," I explain half-heartedly, shuddering at the memory of them.

"Well, it's over and done," Lolly says with deep

concern, patting my hand again. "I'll see you boys later. Few things to get at Rosenfields. Drop by later. We'll have coffee and rolls."

Leaning, I kiss her on the cheek, and Micky and I watch her as she goes down the tile-covered hall, her high heels tapping on the hard flooring.

"What a woman!" Micky remarks. Then there is silence.

"Thanks for being a witness to my character," I say then, with nothing better to say. Our lives have slipped apart, through no fault of our own. It has saddened us both.

"The pleasure was mine," he says, giving me the eye. "I told them you were the biggest gobbler in the business." We both laugh a dry, nervous laugh. "No," he adds, "nothing like that at all. I want you to know I think you were okay in there. Didn't know you had it in you."

"If you want to know the truth, neither did I," I say, and I mean this. We never know until we are put to the test.

Silence again. We turn and stare out the huge window, at the lawn below which is still a deep green, and the limbs of the live oaks which extend up to us, brush the window panes. The evening sun, low in the west, filters through the network of limbs, and lays a faint gold over them, lending a kind of meloncholy sadness to the whole scene.

"Star, about that night," he murmurs, breaking our skein of silence.

"You don't have to apologize about that," I

answer, not wanting to uproot something embarrassing for us both.

"I'm not apologizing," he goes on, insistent. "I —I was drunk that night, drunker than I've ever been in my life, and crazy I guess. Jealous . . . yes, crazy with jealousy."

"You have no reason to be, Micky."

"Yes I do, Star," he says, and there is a gutteral sound to his voice, a voice thickened with passion, and he turns and looks out the window again. His profile is sad, fixed, and there are tears in his eyes. "Yes .. I do have a reason, for I love you, Star, oh, not the love for your hard penis kind of love, but deep down love . . . deep, profound, beautiful. I didn't know it was so easy to love a man."

"I care for you too, Micky," I say, and I *do* care. "I've never lived like this before, not before I came her to Baton Rouge. Oh, queer bars yes, but not to mix with them, not like I did here."

He looks up at me.

"Why, Star?"

"I don't know," I answer. "I truthfully don't know. I've changed I guess—when I met you, Suny. I know now it is possible for two men to love each other, when once I considered it repulsive. And I wonder if this is growing up . . . if this is maturing . . . if this is finding a higher intelligence . . . something the gay has all along, a kind of sixth sense, or seventh, really, a sense all men will have in the far future." I shake my head. "I don't know. I just don't know."

His eyes on mine are solemn, probing, and he says with a trembling voice:

"Do you love Suny?"

"I don't know," I answer abruptly. "I don't even know if I'm sure what love is."

"Do you think you will ever love a man?"

"Micky . . . I don't know. I may even go down on a man someday, or screw him, or let him screw me. If I keep going like I am, I will be doing *all* these things . . . but until . . ."

Two policemen walk past us. The gold on their uniforms catch the light, and reflect back like tiny suns. They smile at us, continue on down the hall.

Micky laughs.

"What's funny?"

"Us," he answers. "*We* take the cake. Here we are standing right on top of the city police station, with cops surrounding us, and here we stand talking about loving men, oral sex . . . ha."

"That's what makes the world go around," I add.

A young clerk comes out a side door. He looks around. Then comes over to us.

"Are you Mr. Tory Star?"

I nod that I am.

"The judge wishes to see you in his chambers. Would you follow me please?"

Micky grips my arm.

"Star . . . think on these things . . . please!"

"I will," I answer quietly, then follow the clerk.

He takes me into a huge room, completely pan-

elled with dark, polished mahogany, elegant, official, yet inviting.

The judge is seated at his desk, a massive man, with a thick head of white hair, a firm face, not pale, indicating a healthy out door life, and with small beady eyes set a little too close to his nose . . . the face of obvious intelligence and great perception. He motions for me to sit down, his long arm extending out over the desk which, though filled with books and pens and papers, has about it a semblance of order. He dismisses the clerk. Then, with his long bony fingers clutched in a ball-like grip, his elbows on the desk, he leans forward and gazes at me intently.

I sit across the desk from him, and return his gaze. I am at a loss at what to expect. Seconds pass.

"Mr. Star," he began, in a quiet manner, his voice a little like Lionel Barrymore's. "I invited you to my chambers, in complete privacy, to commend you on your stand in the case today. Allow me to congratulate you."

I nod in acceptance.

"It is not often we find such a patriot, for any cause. You are a rarity among the species. But not so rare, Mr. Star, that we cannot read more to the case at hand than just what we heard and saw in a courtroom. Rest at ease. The jury has reached its verdict. The two defendents have been found guilty of robbery—simple robbery—mind you, and sentenced to three months at hard labor at our prison

in Angola. They attacked you, beat you, robbed you, and forced you to write checks on a bank at which you did not have an account. You may go free anytime you wish."

I start to rise.

"But, Mr. Star, while you and I are in the privacy of my chambers allow me, if you will, to pose a question."

"Of course, sir," I say directly, easing back in my chair.

"We have had many such cases file through our courts, unknown to you, hundreds actually, week after week and, beneath them all, there is always something of the sexual. Rarely if ever does our listing of cases involve robbery . . . with *only* robbery as the motive, or as robbery as the single factor in the crime . . . with only one party committing the crime and the other party the innocent victim. Usually both are guilty to a certain, undeniable, degree. And there is usally that undercurrent of sex, or passion beneath it all. In other words, the criminal, so to speak, is usually led, or beguiled into acts of violence, robbery, rolling, and sometimes even murder. I tell you this as a means for your own safety in the future. Are you, Mr. Star . . . are you *truly* a homosexual? None shall know but us."

I think of Suny and me that wild, drunken night after we had left Corinthian's and returned to my apartment. I thought of all I had said in the courtroom. I felt I should remain consistent.

I look at him squarely.

"Yes sir. I am a homosexual."

He does not even blink.

"Good . . . I am glad you have spoken the truth. I would like to pass on to you a little advice, so when you go into the future, whatever your profession, you will, I hope, use it wisely. Today, this case was not a trial of homosexuality, though there were undeniable influences of homosexuality upon it. It was a trial based on simple robbery. And, though you made a stand for your rights and for the rights of your companions, do not consider that we of the court have not considered other factors, other peoples' rights. The so-called "punk" (which appelation was sprayed over the courtroom like venom) also has his merits. Most of these, born out of wedlock, or from broken homes, from poor, uneducated families, many growing up to be presentable, and fine-looking, become, through their own absence of livelihood, also a victim, not only of the society that rejects them, but others who pursue them for bodily pleasures. Naturally many of *these* unfortunates rebel, and it is this way in which they fight back, with beatings and robbery. So the "punk," too, has a soap box to climb upon, and *his* word to say on injustice, maltreatment, prejudice.

"It is not wrong that a man is born a homosexual. Nature tells us that within the animal kingdom the condition is frequent and varied. But it is the right or wrong of a man's conduct as a homosexual which concerns greatly the law, and its officers."

He pauses, looks at me again with that long, absent gaze, then continues.

"That is all, Mr. Star. Good day and, I wish you luck in the future."

I rose, a little despondent, having toppled from the pedestal I had put myself on in the courtroom, shook his hand, and got out of his office as quickly as possible.

When I reach the first floor and go out on the sidewalk, the sun is just above the horizon, and is throwing golden shafts of light across the lawn of the building, striking the trunks of the trees and turning them a golden bronze.

There is an ant file of people going down the street opposite, coming from the side door of the courtroom, down the wide steps, and toward Government Street and Third, dispersing where the statue of a Confederate soldier looms up above the buildings and the tops of the trees. The faggots and the queens, flushed out of the trial now it is over, not giggling, flirtatious now, but solemn, their faces sadder, thoughtful. And they go with a kind of contentment, or like someone who has experienced something deeply, and from that experience is a little wiser, and will be more cautious in the future.

What has happened today, the stirring of our nerves, the awaking of our senses and our attitudes, is doing all of us good. For one thing, it has pulled the gay world, that benefaction of a society, together, if but momentarily. What I have said in the courtroom may inspire others to come forward, may

give them that extra something called courage, or may awaken them to a courage they do not know they have. Today, they have a feeling of security they otherwise felt they never had. When they walk down a street, enter a theatre, a bar, a public park, a stadium, they will take with them a sense of freedom and security, a feeling that they will not be subject to ridicule, maltreatment, robbery, manslaughter, and most of all persecution.

As I go down this street now, with the late afternoon sun turning everything to gold, a warmth seems to cover all the earth and, watching these men and boys going on their way, dispersing down various streets to their waiting cars, to their homes, their dormitories, their apartments, my mind is suddenly etched with the half-forgotten picture of my high school graduation, of my class mates and I moving from the building and through the grounds, the shadows of the huge trees on the campus throwing patterns over the gray robes, the square caps with the tassels, the solemn faces, bright, young, innocent faces. I feel now a fraction of what I felt then. That day was a definite landmark in my life, just as today will be another landmark in it. I had learned something then, had prepared myself for a new role in life, as today, another imprint had molded another depression in my image, like a thumb print in a clay figure, one I would be unable to alter or change in the future. Everything that happens to us, however casual or significant, leaves an imprint. Imprint upon imprint molds us into

what we are today, what we will become in the future.

Somehow I feel proud, triumphant, feel that by what I have cried out to others I have done something good, something worthwhile. And that these people, some who are my friends, and those who are not, will go to their homes tonight and will discuss and ponder, will have their little meetings, and will relate this triumphant experience. They feel important now ... like the whole world is looking at them ... not for what they are ... but for their right to choose to remain what they are. There is a feeling of oneness, of wonder, and a new feeling of *equality*.

Suny is waiting for me on the corner, a twentieth century knight in white jeans, brown double breasted rawhide jacket with a kangaroo fur collar, tan buff boots, and black western hat, set cockily on the back of his head.

I come up to him slowly, and he flashes a broad grin, waiting, and watching my every move until I reach his side.

"You ought to run for President," he says mockingly, still grinning, leaning a little towards me, for he is a little taller than I, "with that speech you made in there." He nods toward the courthouse. "I'm glad it's over, baby."

"It's been a tiring day," I mutter, changing arms with my black topcoat, which is getting heavier by the minute. Now that it is all over, having remained in that suffocating courtroom all day, with a

hundred or more people breathing the same air, I am developing a headache. I touch my forehead, and let out an exhausted sigh.

"You look tired, baby," he says, still bending over me, the last rays of the sun shining in his magnificent eyes, making them all the more fascinating to watch, all the more tantalizing. "let me buy you a drink."

"Thanks, I need that," I agree, so we go around the corner to the Unicorn. He starts to catch of my arm as we go across the street, then quickly withdraws. He indeed looks on me that much as a woman.

Going from the light into the dark, we can hardly see when we first go in, and stand for a moment at the entrance until our eyes become accustomed to the dimness.

The bar is already decorated for Christmas, with red garlands strung along the walls, shimmering with foil icicles, Santa Claus faces of plastic with light bulbs behind them, greetings of Yule Tide in sparkling cut-outs over the mirror, pinned up with transparent tape, and a small Christmas tree at both ends of the bar, artificial to the extreme with frosty pink lights. The bar girls have donned Santa caps instead of plumes, the little white tassel bouncing along their long hair as they skip from table to table waiting on customers. Christmas carols dominate the juke box, and everyone inside seem to have the holiday spirit.

We find a table at the far end, directly beneath

one of the plastic Santa Claus faces which lights the table and as we are being seated one of the girls comes over and takes our order, with a cheery, "Merry Christmas."

We return her salute, and order two beers.

"Well, it's all over and done with," Suny began, his elbows on the table. "A worry off . . . *both* . . . our minds."

"Thank God!" I reply, thinking of everything that has happened, from that awesome night up to this day. "I hope I never have to go through anything like *this* again as long as I live."

"You won't, Star," he assures me, clicking his teeth.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you are always going to be with me."

His eyes are steadily on mine.

"You think so?" I say in a whisper, too tired to really think.

"I *know* so," he says right back, putting a hand on my arm. The girl comes over with the beer and he jerks his hand back. He unbuttons his coat, tosses it back on both sides of his body, and fumbles in his tight pants pockets for change. I notice the bar girl is admiring his build. She lingers, anxious to make conversation.

"Why were all those men coming out of the courthouse over there a minute ago?" she asks, directing her voice to Suny. He gives me a disgusted look, then looks up at her with a frozen smile, deliberate.

"A trial was going on. Some woman shot her husband."

"How dreadful," she says, her mouth a round O. "Why, ah can't imagine *any* woman shooting a man . . . can *you*, honey?"

"You see . . . *he* was *white*."

She gasps.

"You mean . . . she wuz a *nigger*?"

Suny nods, shamefully, his lower lip thrust out half an inch.

She returns to the bar, hurriedly.

"*That* got rid of her," he says to me, giving me a reckless wink.

I all but melt. Then I reprimand him.

"You shouldn't have told her that."

"Listen, Star. I've waited all the damn day to be with you, worrying about you, couldn't talk to you, surrounded by all those screaming faggots. Why . . . every time I saw you up there on the stand, defending these people, doing it all alone, my hands ached (he spreads his fingers) my hands ached to hold you . . . I mean *ached*."

The beer is wonderful. I do not think I have ever tasted one so cold, so soothing to my nerves, so delightful.

"I'm glad you were so concerned," I say to him as he lights me a cigar and thrusts it to my lips. I think of the rabbit-faced boy with the pink hair sticking the cigarette holder in Corinthian's mouth.

"You *know* how much I care, Star. And you were wonderful today, just wonderful."

"I wasn't *that* good. I just did something I felt I *had* to do. Something that should be done in this town . . . for those poor kids."

"Yes," he laments, looking a little sad. "Very noble, and in doing it you sure stuck yourself way out on a limb."

I frown. I know he is telling the truth.

"That is why I cannot stay here any longer. That is why I am going to have to quit my job at the Blue Mirror, go to some other town, find something else to do."

"You mean leave?"

His beer mug hits the table.

"You know I can't stay here," I declare, looking up at him from my beer mug. "After what's happened."

His eyes shine like diamonds under the Santa Claus light.

"Just like Jesus Christ," he says, his voice extremely loud. "Come into town, do your good little deed, then vanish!"

I look at him quickly, steadily.

"That is cruel!"

He drops his eyes, then, raising them slowly, shaded under their long curling lashes, he looks at me for a long silent moment.

"I know it is cruel. But it is the truth. I love you. I know you've been hurt. And I cannot stand to see you hurt . . . or to go away where I can not see you, be with you . . . protect you."

I smile a little, faintly, thinking sadly how utter-

ly wonderful are his words, yet how hopeless, how forlornly hopeless.

I try to think of something plausible to say, something that will make this wonderful, beautiful person see things as they should be. He is staring at me now, in that old way of his, and I want to faint.

"Suny," I began, knowing my voice is trembling, "you are so young, so very wonderfully young and, no matter what I think of you, how I care, or in what way I might care, you won't always feel this way. What you know of this life, what you have already experienced, the others you have been with, is no true comparison. You only think you want me ... through your experience with those others."

"How do you know I won't always feel this way? Just because I am younger than you—because I *am* young." He leans closer, his beer mug touching mine, his index finger rubbing the back of my hand. "Listen, Star, and listen good, baby. That night ... that first night I met you, and I said all those things ... things about liking a good thrill and all that. I was only blowing steam, like everybody else in those joints. Nobody has ever touched me before, never, and I have never touched anybody but you, so help me God and may my soul go to hell if I'm lying! I know what I want! I want you, Star!"

"How can you be so sure ... and you so young?"

"What's age got to do with it?" he stammers, glaring at me. "I told you one night, the night you got beaten and robbed that I did not know why I was always lonely ... but I know now, Star. Today,

today in that courtroom . . . I looked at you, heard you talking, and I said then . . . I said: 'I want Star.' "

I look at him tiredly, wondering if it is possible this young boy could be telling the truth, that someone, whether a man or a woman, cares for me at last, not for what I am, or what I've got, but for me, loves me for myself alone.

I look at him for a long time now, our eyes magnetized each to the others, the music, this bar, these people, immune to everything but ourselves, our eyes, our faces, our hearts beating out a desperate meaningful rhythm, pounding insistently for a verdict which must be instantly rendered. And I ask him the all important question.

"Suny . . . why do you love me, why do you want me?"

His eyes blink, his soft warm voice falters:

"Because you are *you*, Star. Your goodness, your kindness, yourself; because there is no one else like you, and there will never be one like you in my heart . . . do you understand that?"

"I understand, but our future, what do you expect of our future, together . . . in this town?"

He looks at me then as if he does not believe what I have said.

"Our future! Why . . . we'll stay here, as before, be together, live together."

"Like two queers?"

His eyes blaze.

"God! Star," he half-shouts, pointing a finger

toward the courtroom. "You stand up over there, before God, before all those faggots, before everybody and say you are a homosexual and now you can't even be with me, to care for me."

"I didn't mean it that way . . . not like that."

"You try to make it sound so terrible, so damned rotten!"

Several heads turn in our direction, their eyes questioning.

I search his tormented eyes, desperate to make him understand, to show him in some way that the demands of my past life, my ex-wife, my son (God help them), had taken so much of me, that I am not certain I can make it with him, can give enough of myself to him to keep him, and I must not, cannot hurt this warm, loving boy.

"Suny, listen," I all but whisper, leaning toward him, my cigar poised to partially conceal my face. "I just can't go back to the lounge and work . . . not after this . . . I just can't."

His eyes suddenly turn cold.

"So . . . it's Micky you really care about."

"You know that isn't so."

"Then why?" He shouts.

I scan the lounge.

"The bar girls are looking," I caution.

"I don't give a God damn!" he cries, his fist crashing to the table. Our beer mugs rattle. "And why should you? Two hours ago you were telling Baton Rouge you were a fruity queer! Now you're scared stiff if a bunch of whores find out about you

and me. Kill forever in your mind whatever illusions you may have that you and I are queer. We are both men, Star, real he-men. But we love one another, and what we do is not queer."

"Maybe every man who is in love with another man feels like that . . . that they are not queer."

"Do you *care* about being queer? Is that what's bothering you?"

I cannot answer. I am thinking of my past, what I was then, my dislike for that type man, my desire for women, my marriage—my son—yet, my strong desire for this young boy, to feel his arms around me, his hot lips on mine, this strange, unheard of madness—this tantalizing, fascinating madness, before which my brain, my heart, and all my past convictions tumble.

The juke box has momentarily abandoned its monotonous jubilation on Christmas, and is now playing the haunting, "Broken Promises."

Tears well up in Suny's eyes, and he will not take his steady gaze from me. At this moment I wish I had been born a woman, to feel, to the deepest recesses of my being, his true power, his power and darkness as it was intended to be.

"Star" he whispers, leaning so close he blocks out all the world, everything in this bar, except his glowing face. "I love you. Down in the deepest part of me, I love you. What is past in your life and in mine is gone. That will never come back. But what will come to pass is not gone, and whatever I do in the future, wherever I go, I want you there with

me, queer or what have you. I am going to do what you stood up in that courtroom and said *should* be done. I am going to stand by my rights, and your rights as a person, and I am going to love you in the way I love you now: in my heart, and with my body."

I look up at him, lost in all he has said, and cry forlornly:

"How do you know I love you?"

"You told me you did . . . that first night."

"I was drunk."

We both try to smile, but fail miserably.

He catches me by the hand. His eyes draw me into his arms, not physically, but mentally. And I know now that the embrace of the eyes can be stronger than the embrace of the arms.

"Star—baby, I want us to walk out of this bar, right now, and go home. And I want us to live together, as man to man, man to woman, what have you. I don't want us to ever go to the Blue Mirror Lounge again. This will be our place from now on. We'll both work, pool our money, live only for one another. Star . . . Star . . . wish me a merry Christmas, then we'll go . . ."

I look at him, his burning eyes, his tears, his quivering lips, and I do not think any more . . .

"Merry Christmas, Suny."

The End

FACES IN SECRET

This is the story of Tory Star — a dancer dedicated to this profession, his standards and the search for his human identity. Tory's perfect physique, small stature and drive for perfection make him a person apart.

An engagement to dance at the Blue Mirror Lounge in Baton Rouge draws him into the orbit of the "gay" world and its pressures and ensuing events force him into a hero's role in court to stand against the injustices visited upon the homosexual. After his acquittal, Tory's talk with the Judge in the jurist's chambers casts more light on his personal search.

"Faces In Secret" is a penetrating look into the "gay" world and the hard facts of life there. It is the story of a man's search to find himself — and the surpassing strangeness of his discovery . . .